

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

RICHARD E. BYERS

BROTHERHOOD OF THE GRIFFON • BOOK IV



THE MASKED WITCHES

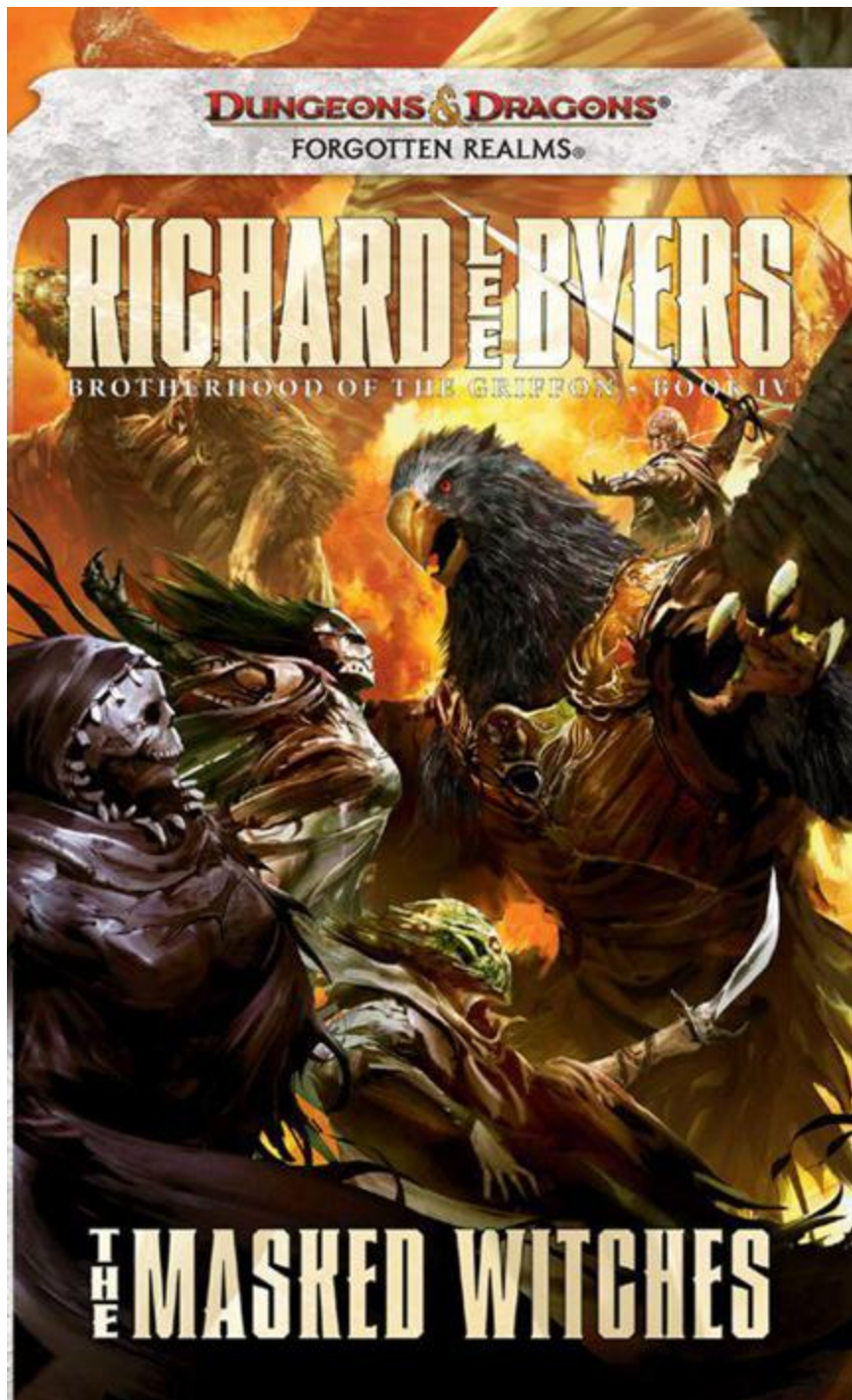
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A Griffon Leader's Destiny

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He screamed his own battle cry, an imitation of a griffon's screech, and sprang to meet the undead goblins. He saw their weapons at last—a scimitar and a spear—as they struck at him, and he smashed them both out of line with a single sweeping parry. He riposted at the zombie on his right, and his broadsword split its skull. The yellow gleam guttered out in its eyes, and its knees buckled.

Grinning, Vandar tried to jerk his sword free. But it stuck in the wound. Meanwhile, the other goblin's scimitar flashed at him. He leaped back and avoided the stroke, but had to let go of the hilt of his own weapon to do it.

The second zombie advanced and made another cut, pushing Vandar farther and farther away from his own blade. He rushed his foe before it could poise the scimitar for a fourth attack, bulled the reeking creature over, and dumped it on its back. He dropped to his knees on top of its chest and hammered both fists down into its face. Bone crunched, the piss-colored glimmer went out of the creature's eyes, and it stopped moving. A small part of Vandar, the bit not yet transported by the fury, recognized that he, too, might have just hurt himself. He might even have broken a finger bone or two. But, for the moment, he couldn't feel it.

He was free to retake his own familiar sword, but his rage begrudged the moment it would take to scramble around and pull on the weapon. Instead, the zombie's scimitar was

ready to hand. Vandar grabbed it, leaped to his feet, and whirled toward the cloaked figure.



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RICHARD LEE BYERS

BROTHERHOOD OF THE GRIFFON • BOOK IV

THE MASKED WITCHES



Brotherhood of the Griffon
Book IV
THE MASKED WITCHES

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FOR VICTORIA

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Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and

destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.



A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

P R O L O G U E

Vandar Cherlinka hefted the straw-wrapped earthenware bottle. The lack of weight made it plain that only a few swallows of jhuild remained inside, and he wished he could keep all the tart red firewine for himself.

Only for an instant, though, and then he pushed the thought firmly out of his mind. For no man rose to lead a berserker lodge without training himself to be as generous as he was valorous. He told himself that he never would have felt the selfish urge at all if his traveling companion weren't so ... uncompanionable.

The problem wasn't that Lady Yhelbruna—reputedly the oldest hathran in all Rashemen—never removed her brown leather mask and gloves or even pushed back the cowl of her robe in Vandar's view. As curious as the next fellow, he'd wondered if at some point during the trek, he might discover if the witch was a magically preserved beauty or a hideously wrinkled crone—the only possibilities that gossip and rumor entertained—but he hadn't really expected it. No, what rankled was her cheerless taciturnity for mile after hard, clambering mile, the silence broken only by her

incomprehensible murmurs to herself and the occasional terse command.

Still, he wouldn't let her haughty aloofness turn *him* into a bad companion. He pulled the cork, and it came out with a little popping sound. He offered the bottle. Instead of taking it, she suddenly twisted away from him, and the campfire, too, to peer at the black masses of the mountains rising against the night sky. The patches of snow on the peaks were pale smudges in the moonlight.

Vandar's heart beat a little faster. He cast about but saw nothing. Which didn't necessarily mean they were alone on the mountainside. The High Country possessed more than its share of dangers, and it was possible a hathran had sensed what even an experienced hunter couldn't have.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Be still," she replied in her steely contralto, "and you'll hear."

He strained to listen, and after a moment he caught the noise. There was a pounding to the east, farther up the mountain they'd been climbing before making camp.

Yhelbruna sprang to her feet, as though still youthful and spry. "Pick up your sword and javelin," she said.

"Why?" Vandar asked, reaching for the weapons that lay within easy reach of his hand.

"Because you need to kill something, and it will be better if it doesn't hear us coming," she replied. "So close your mouth and follow me."

Swallowing an exasperated retort, he obeyed.

The High Country could be treacherous even by day. In addition to trolls, kobolds, and other such creatures waiting in ambush, a wayfarer had to be wary of scree that would crumble under a body's weight, and crusts of snow concealing sheer crevasses. But Yhelbruna strode along through the chill autumn air as though such hazards were of no concern. Vandar could only hope that her magic encompassed the ability to see in the dark like an owl.

Maybe it did, for they reached the top of a ridge without coming to grief. They started down the other side into a sort of notch in the mountainside, a long, narrow pocket where snow lay unmelted from winter to winter. The steady beat of the knocking was louder, and Vandar caught the soft chant that accompanied it. He couldn't understand the words, but the power in them twisted his guts and put a metallic taste in his mouth.

Yhelbruna raised her hand to halt his advance. She pointed with her bluewood wand.

Peering, he made out what she was indicating despite the gloom, which was even deeper than on the slope they'd scaled to find the little valley. The backdrop of snow helped. A menhir rose from that white carpet, and a cloaked figure was hammering the rock with a crooked staff. A pair of goblins looked on, recognizable by virtue of their stunted frames.

Yhelbruna waved Vandar onward with little flicks of the wand.

He was not averse to going. A berserker leader never shrank from a fight. Still, he gave her a look that asked if, her powers notwithstanding, she intended him to handle all three foes by himself. She responded with a nod.

"Typical," he muttered.

Half annoyed and half amused, Vandar skulked on down the slope. As far as he could tell, none of the trio below had a bow, a sling, or anything else to strike a man down from a distance. Yet even so, he might as well sneak in as close as he could.

His approach worked until he reached the snow. Then, despite his efforts to stay silent, his steps made tiny crunching sounds, and eventually the goblins and the cloaked figure pivoted in his direction.

Stealth had pretty much served its purpose. A few more strides would carry him close enough to cast his javelin.

Vandar started running, and then an earsplitting screech stabbed into his head.

He knew—or a part of him did—that the scream only lasted for a moment or two. But it seemed to echo on and on inside his skull, terrifying him and smothering his ability to think. Indeed, it nearly blinded him to anything but his own excruciating sensations.

Nearly, but not quite. He registered the goblins floundering toward him through the snow, and he knew he had to ready himself to fight. Like a drowning man struggling toward the water's surface, he strained to banish fear and confusion, to silence the howl inside his head. After a moment, the phantom noise abated.

When it did, he saw there was something wrong with the goblins. They moved in an awkward, shuffling fashion, and they stank of rot. The yellow gleam in their sunken eyes had nothing to do with the moonlight.

Zombies. Vandar smiled because that didn't scare him. Like every Rashemi warrior deserving of the name, he'd fought the legions of Thay—the land of necromancers and the undead—many times.

He no longer held his javelin. He must have dropped it when he'd been staggering and flailing around. With no reason to delay, he visualized the mighty winged totem of Griffon Lodge—half eagle and half lion—and willed himself to go berserk.

Power blazed through Vandar like a thunderbolt. It was as overwhelming as the shriek had been, full of strength and joy, but most of all fury, a lust to kill.

He screamed his own battle cry, an imitation of a griffon's screech, and sprang to meet the undead goblins. He saw their weapons at last—a scimitar and a spear—as they struck at him, and he smashed them both out of line with a single sweeping parry. He riposted at the zombie on his right, and his broadsword split its skull. The yellow gleam guttered out in its eyes, and its knees buckled.

Grinning, Vandar tried to jerk his sword free. But it stuck in the wound. Meanwhile, the other goblin's scimitar flashed at him. He leaped back and avoided the stroke, but had to let go of the hilt of his own weapon to do it.

The second zombie advanced and made another cut, pushing Vandar farther and farther away from his own blade. He rushed his foe before it could poise the scimitar for a fourth attack, bulled the reeking creature over, and dumped it on its back. He dropped to his knees on top of its chest and hammered both fists down into its face. Bone crunched, the piss-colored glimmer went out of the creature's eyes, and it stopped moving. A small part of Vandar, the bit not yet transported by the fury, recognized that he, too, might have just hurt himself. He might even have broken a finger bone or two. But for the moment, he couldn't feel it.

He was free to retake his own familiar sword, but his rage begrudged the moment it would take to scramble around and pull on the weapon. Instead, the zombie's scimitar was ready to hand. Vandar grabbed it, leaped to his feet, and whirled toward the cloaked figure.

From a closer distance, Vandar could see that she was one of the womanlike creatures known as hags. She was more humanlooking than some, no taller than he was. And before undeath had claimed her, mottling her leathery hide with decay and kindling a sickly amber glow in her eyes, she could possibly have passed for human as long as she kept her twisted hands with their long talons hidden inside her mantle.

He charged her, and she screamed again. The noise stung his face and chest like a barrage of pebbles, but it didn't addle him. His fury armored him against it.

Unfortunately, shrieking wasn't her only trick. The hag thrust out her hand at him, and a freezing wind howled and shoved him from the side. Caught in the vortex that had sprung up around her, snow swirled up from the ground.

Thrown off balance, Vandar fell. Instinct warned him that he mustn't stay where he'd dropped, so, impeded by the snow, he flung himself to the side. Thunder boomed, and a dazzling flash lit up the notch in the mountain, robbing him of his night vision. A hint of the lightning he'd just dodged stung him through the ground.

Prompted by instinct again, he heaved himself to his feet and cut at a shadow. The curved sword sheared into solidity. At the same instant, something snagged in his vest of boiled leather. The hag's claws ripped away the protection and scored his flesh beneath.

Vandar ripped the scimitar out of the place where it had lodged and cut at the murky form before him. But the hag was too close for him to use the unfamiliar blade to best effect. Even the strength of a berserker couldn't make it bite deeply. Meanwhile, the creature scrabbled at him, tearing his armor to shreds.

He cut low, trying for a knee, and felt a jolt as the scimitar met flesh and bone. The hag's raking, ripping assault abated, but surely not because she was trying to escape. The undead were fearless. She must be trying to circle around behind him, Vandar thought, or open up some distance between them to facilitate the use of her magic.

Battered by the howling wind and squinting, he turned and sought her. As he did, a measure of his sight returned, enough to spot her a few paces away. She was favoring the leg he'd cut and had a horizontal gash across her belly. Her cowl had slipped backward off her head, and her long white hair lashed and streamed in the whirlwind like her ragged garments. A glimmering flickered inside her gnarled fingers, intermittently revealing the shadows of her bones, like streaks of infection in her flesh.

With a bellow, Vandar threw himself at her, and she sprang to meet him. He cut at her neck, and an instant later, she drove the talons of both hands into his chest.

Something crackled. A sensation of fire along his nerves made him jerk like a man suffering a seizure. Then the hag's claws slipped out of his pectorals, and she collapsed. When she hit the ground, her head, nearly severed by the scimitar, tore away completely from her neck. The yellow gleam in her eyes went out, and the unnatural wind sighed away to nothing.

With all three of Vandar's foes destroyed, the berserker fury drained away. He felt weak and shaky, and the sudden throb of pain in his blistered, bleeding chest and bruised hands made the sick feeling worse. Panting, he flopped down to sit in the snow.

He heard stone cracking and crunching. He twisted his head and looked around.

It was the first time he'd taken a close look at the menhir. Strings of small, jagged-looking runes extended from the top of the granite shaft to the bottom. Though he couldn't read them, Vandar recognized the writing of the Raumvirans, who'd lived throughout those lands in ancient times and had left ruins and monuments to prove it.

Though a wooden staff should have been incapable of breaking granite, the hag had succeeded in effacing some of the symbols, and even with her body lying headless on the ground, her work continued. More patches of stone chipped away, seemingly of their own accord. Hairline cracks snaked out from the disappearing runes, and the entire menhir shivered.

"It's like an egg hatching," Vandar whispered. He couldn't explain exactly how he knew that, but he did—just as he sensed that whatever was about to emerge would make even an undead hag seem like a trivial annoyance by comparison.

Still trembling, he dragged himself to his feet and poised himself to go berserk a second time. It would be a strain to do it again so soon, particularly when he was wounded. But he didn't see that he had a choice.

Yhelbruna was advancing on the stone, although not in a straight line. Her path weaved from side to side and even doubled back at certain points, as though the footprints she left in the snow were themselves a form of writing. She swept her bluewood wand up and down and side to side as she chanted rhymes in a tone that reminded Vandar of someone snapping commands at an unruly dog.

The menhir shuddered harder. More of the sigils crumbled. Though he was no mystic, and unversed in any mysteries save those of his own lodge, Vandar suddenly felt the elation of another mind. The psychic intrusion was so powerful that, for a moment, he shared the emotion, even as he also discerned that as soon as the thing in the stone achieved its release, it intended to kill him and Yhelbruna, too.

Yhelbruna sang words in a different rhythm. Her voice reminded Vandar of a bugle blowing on a battlefield. She pressed her hands to the sides of her face.

The hathran's leather mask burned like the sun. The radiance it shed lit up everything in front of her, but seemed to fall most intensely on the disintegrating menhir.

Its cracks closed, and new stone formed to seal over the broken places. Glyphs rewrote themselves.

The alien exultation that had intruded in Vandar's mind gave way to rage and determination. The creature in the shaft made a supreme effort, and for a moment, a huge and shadowy form, with horns curling upward from its two reptilian heads and several tentacles writhing from each shoulder in place of arms, loomed above the standing stone. Then, in a paroxysm of hate and frustration, it disappeared. To his relief, Vandar's link to its psyche vanished with it.

Yhelbruna flopped down in the snow. He hurried toward her and saw that her mask was gone, perhaps fading from existence once she had used up every bit of magic stored within it.

Her heart-shaped face was youthful, with smooth skin and apple cheeks. It was more girlish and less queenly than he

could have imagined, with a largish nose and a hint of humor at the corners of the wide mouth.

He kneeled beside her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just tired," she said, smiling. "Now you've seen my face, and, under the circumstances, there's no sacrilege in it. But you won't tell anyone what you saw."

He wondered how she knew he'd hoped to see her unmasked. "I swear I won't, by the totem of my lodge," he replied. "But can you tell me what just happened? What was that thing?"

"Ah," Yhelbruna said. "The Raumvirans who once lived in these mountains were enemies to the Nars, and the Nar wizards were masters at summoning devils and demons to do their bidding. They sent such fiends to trouble the High Country, and the Raumathari mages coped by erecting traps like this one. A spirit that wandered too near was pulled inside."

"And held," said Vandar. "Until something set it free."

"Exactly," replied the hathran. "We Wychlaran inspect and maintain the stones every year. That's enough to counter the effects of simple weathering and the like. But obviously, it can't prevent tampering."

"By filthy Thayan hands," Vandar said.

"I would assume," Yhelbruna replied.

"Curse it," he said. "It's not even an act of war, because we're not *at* war right now. It's just ... evil. Setting a demon loose to wander around and hurt anyone unlucky enough to run into it."

Her smile widened slightly. "I'm sorry if the Thayans have disappointed you," she said.

The joke surprised a chuckle out of him, which made his gashed, burned chest ache worse. "That's all right," he replied. "To tell the truth, I never did have a very high opinion of them."

"Nor I, even a hundred years ago when Thay was a cruel, wicked foe, but nowhere near as vile as it is now," she said,

as she touched her face. It felt strange to have it exposed to the chill mountain air. "I think I've recovered enough of my strength to heal your wounds. After that, I'd like very much to share that firewine you offered."

Yhelbruna's friendliness lasted for the remainder of the night. But in the morning, to his disappointment, she tied a scarf around the lower portion of her face and seemed to shroud herself in severity again. They climbed the trail in silence, just as they had before.

Midday brought them to the flat, oval tabletop of a summit. To the south, the Sunrise Mountains, of which the High Country was the northernmost part, marched away as far as the eye could see. In the opposite direction, the mountains jutted out in the near distance, but sharp eyes could make out the spot where they gave way to flat land that was mostly uninhabited desolation. To the west lay the green and silver heart of Rashemen, with its forests, rivers, and lakes; and to the east, the endless steppes called the Hordelands.

Yhelbruna looked around, muttered under her breath, and slashed her wand through a Z-shaped figure. "I'll perform the ritual here," she said.

Vandar smiled. "You didn't tell me the journey was nearly over," he replied.

"Because I didn't know this was the spot until I saw it," she said.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

"For now, stay out of my way and be quiet," she replied.

Vandar did his best to comply while the hathran walked around and around the summit. Alternately silent, chanting, and sometimes crooning, she stopped periodically to swirl her bluewood wand in figures like intricate knots. She was asking the help of the local spirits. And, one by one, they flickered in and out of view: an enormous raven perched on an outcropping. A doll-sized man of living stone. A ghostly wolverine.

When Yhelbruna had finished her preparations and consultations, she beckoned to Vandar with an imperious twitch of her wand. He joined her beside the jutting piece of granite where the raven spirit had appeared.

“Give me your hand,” she said.

When he did, she turned it palm up and brushed the tip of the wand across it. The rounded bluewood slit his skin like a razor. Though it didn’t hurt—and it would have shamed him to flinch even if it had—he caught his breath in surprise.

She dabbed at the welling blood, using her wand like a paintbrush to daub symbols on the outcropping. Though stylized, some were less cryptic than the Raumathari runes. Vandar recognized the rose of Chauntea, the eyes and stars of Selûne, the unicorn head of Mielikki, and a beaked, winged, four-footed beast that was presumably his lodge’s totem.

Yhelbruna waved him away when she had finished writing. Then she lifted her face to the sky and started singing a song punctuated by rasping shrieks similar to his own battle cry, only even more bloodcurdlingly realistic. The power she was raising sent concentric ripples running out from her feet through the snow, as though it was a pond disturbed by a pebble.

She sang the spell three times through and started on a fourth time before anything answered. Then a speck appeared above the peaks to the south.

Flying fast, it beat its way toward the humans on their mountaintop, while Vandar gradually made out the details of its appearance. The lashing wings. The eagle head with its golden eyes and curved beak, a match for the raptor talons on its forelegs. The leonine hindquarters and tail, where bronze-colored feathers gave way to tawny fur.

It floated and wheeled above the mountaintop, seemingly inspecting the humans. Then, one or two at a time other griffons came to join it. Yhelbruna explained to Vandar that she was calling these beasts from the south, where they’d

found easy prey near the mines of Tethkel. They had devoured mules, goats, sheep, and even men, prompting the locals to ask the hathrans to put an end to the slaughter.

At first, the dozens of soaring, circling beasts were a glorious confusion, but gradually Vandar observed differences. The one currently ascending had dark brown plumage with scarcely a hint of bronzy gleam. One that kept swooping particularly low was mostly fur—it only had feathers on its wings and head. A third was missing the tip of its tail.

Whatever their traits, they were all magnificent. Vandar studied them, rapt. He wanted them like he'd never wanted anything before.

The creatures' savage strength spoke to the deepest part of him, the part that had first drawn him to the griffon totem and the Griffon Lodge. But there was even more to it than that. Though his lodge held a place of honor, it was by no means the largest or most prestigious in Rashemen, nor was he the land's preeminent warrior. But the creatures soaring overhead could change that. One day, they might even make their master the next Iron Lord, when Mangan Uruk went to join his ancestors.

Vandar had been reasonably sure from the start that Yhelbruna meant to give the griffons into his care. He was both the obvious candidate and the one man she'd ordered to accompany her on her quest. And surely last night's chance encounter had confirmed the wisdom of her choice. Grinning, he asked the Goddesses to bless the stinking Thayans and all their despicable schemes. For thanks to them, Yhelbruna had seen with her own eyes just what a stalwart hero he was.

Once again the hathran, her voice grown hoarse, reached the last line of her song. She swept out the arms of her voluminous cloak so that she looked like she was spreading wings of her own. She screeched her loudest scream yet.

As one, the griffons plunged toward the mountaintop.

If they were diving and swooping to kill the humans who'd dared to summon them, they would easily succeed. Not even Yhelbruna's magic could fend off so many powerful beasts all at once. Yet Vandar laughed and raised his empty hands in welcome, because he had no doubt the witch was in control. How could it be otherwise when the griffons were his destiny?

And as he'd expected, the beasts simply landed in the snow. Many turned their heads to glare at him, but they made no move to attack.

With its wings half furled, the biggest griffon of all alit right in front of Yhelbruna. Some of its feathers were more gold than bronze, painting streaks of brightness through its pinions, while its eyes were as blue as the clear sky above. They stared into Yhelbruna's face, and she peered steadily back.

Vandar wondered how he'd missed seeing the striped griffon before, even among such a throng of them. For it was plainly the leader, and that meant, although all the beasts would belong to the lodge, the spirits must surely intend that one to be his own special steed.

Fascinated, he hurried closer, weaving his way through the lesser griffons. Constrained by Yhelbruna's enchantments, they allowed him to pass unmolested when one snap of a beak could have nipped off his head, or the flick of a talon could have spilled his guts in the snow. The closer he approached, the more majestic the blue-eyed griffon appeared, and when he came within arm's reach, it finally turned his head away from Yhelbruna to regard him.

He reached out a trembling hand to stroke the feathers on its neck. Yhelbruna pivoted and whipped her wand across his fingertips. The startling burst of pain made him snatch his arm back, and, possibly agitated by all the sudden motion, the griffon let out a screech.

Vandar rounded on Yhelbruna. "What's wrong?" he demanded. "The beast is mine, isn't it? That's why I'm here."

“You presume,” said the witch in her makeshift mask. “You’re here because I had a use for the affinity in your blood. I don’t yet know who’s meant to claim the griffons. We’ll all have to wait for the Three to speak.”

O N E

As he and his companions flew in from the south, Aoth Fezim studied the snow-shrouded town ahead: a collection of sturdy lodges with steep, crested roofs. A massive castle of stone and iron rose in their center, towering over every other structure and looking far more ... well—to use an unkind word—civilized. Aoth supposed there was a reason for that. Although the Iron Lords had occupied the pile for as long as they'd been the warlords of Rashemen, it had started out as a Nar keep, and maybe the architectural style was still more Nar than otherwise.

It felt a little strange to behold Immilmar, the capital of Rashemen, or most any part of the northern lands. Thoughts of the place had often occupied him since his youth. Commoners of Thay, such as Aoth, were of Rashemi stock. Although he'd been born into the pale, lanky Mulan aristocracy, mischievous nature had given him the darker skin and short, burly frame of a member of the lower orders. As a result, he'd endured childhood taunts and brawls, and the Red Wizards had never seen fit to induct him into one of their arcane orders.

Later, as a war mage in Thay's legions, Aoth had fought the true Rashemi along his country's northern border. But until his journey to Immilmar, he'd never seen more than the southern edge of Rashemen—not before the War of the Zulkirs, and not in all the decades since.

You still aren't seeing it, said Jet, speaking mind to mind. You're too busy picking at your memories. Pull your head out of your arse and look where I'm looking.

Considering that they shared a psychic link, and that the familiar was actually using his master's eyes at the moment, that wasn't difficult. Jet often availed himself of Aoth's sight, because the same magical storm that had extended the human's life had granted him vision even keener than a griffon's.

That sight enabled him to make out the skaters and ice fishermen on the frozen surface of Lake Ashane, though at that distance they were only tiny specks. More to the point, Aoth could see that the broad-beamed ship sitting beside the water was no mere canoe, raft, or felucca, but rather a three-masted vessel with a pair of odd-looking panels on each side of her hull. She belonged on the high seas, not in such an inland waterway. The ship's figurehead was a horned, bare-breasted she-demon, and the flag atop the central mast bore a leering red skull with crossed yellow thunderbolts beneath.

Aoth drew breath to curse, and Cera Eurthos asked, "What's wrong?" Seated behind him with her arms around his waist, the priestess had felt his body shift.

"That ship beside the lake is the *Storm of Vengeance*," he replied.

"The sellsword ship?" she asked.

"Yes, and by all accounts, Mario Bez had a profitable year fighting along the Dragon Coast."

"And you think he's come to buy the griffons, too."

"I do. The *Storm of Vengeance* is a skyship, so fielding a company of riders on flying steeds would suit his style of warfare. I can't imagine what else would bring him here. Even if the Rashemi were in the habit of hiring mercenaries, winter's the wrong season for it."

"Well, don't worry about it. You had a good year, too. You saved Chessenta from ruin, and Shala Karanok rewarded you

accordingly. I'm sure you can outbid Captain Bez."

"I hope so." He needed those animals.

The Brotherhood of the Griffon, his own sellsword company, had endured a hard couple of years. What the world at large viewed as a failed invasion of Thay had left its reputation tarnished and its ranks depleted. A defeat of sorts in Impiltur had aggravated the damage.

But as Cera had said, he and his comrades had turned things around that summer, in Chessenta and Threskel. They'd won notable victories. And, as a result, new recruits and offers of employment had come flooding in.

But one problem remained. They had lost too many griffons in their battles against Szass Tam, Alasklerbanbastos, and ultimately Tchazzar. If the Brotherhood were to continue practicing its own highly effective style of warfare, they had to obtain new mounts. So the news that the Iron Lord had dozens to sell brought Aoth hurrying north with only three companions: Jet, Cera, and Jhesrhi Coldcreek, currently riding the giant hawk she'd shaped from the wind. A larger group might have slowed the journey down, and some of his officers needed to stay behind to supervise the men in their winter quarters.

Aoth supposed he should have realized he wouldn't be the only prospective buyer rushing to Immilmar. There truly was no time to lose. Discerning the tenor of his master's thoughts, Jet swooped down toward the courtyard behind the citadel's primary gate.

* * * * *

Jhesrhi's golden hair streamed out behind her as she sent her conjured hawk plunging after Jet and his riders. Her patched, stained war cloak and mage's robe fluttered around her willowy form.

Touching down, she swung herself off her mount, thanked it in one of the tongues of Sky Home, the realm of the air

elementals, and permitted it to dissolve back into pure wind. Before it departed, the wind howled and blew particles of snow from the shoveled heaps shoveled into the cleared sections of the courtyard.

Jhesrhi was glad that her recent accident, if that was the proper term for it, hadn't cost her the ability to command elements other than flame. To a degree, she could contain the heat inside her. She could wear clothing or sit on a chair without it catching fire. But if she were to ride a mount of flesh and bone for very long, the contact with her would pain and blister the poor beast.

Which meant she herself would never fly on griffonback again. That saddened her, but it was the only part of her transformation she regretted. At first the change had been a shock, but ultimately, it had brought her a kind of peace.

Aoth, however, didn't seem to believe that. Though he hadn't said so, she knew he'd brought her along partly because he suspected she was in despair and needed tending—a solicitude that irked and touched her in equal measure.

At any rate, she was glad to escape Chessenta. She'd hated the place as a child, and with the reinstitution of the Green Hand laws designed to constrain and marginalize those with arcane talents, she hated it again. Perhaps, despite its barbaric reputation, Rashemen would prove more congenial.

On first inspection, however, there was little that was cheerful or welcoming about that particular fortress. It was all gray stone and black iron—surely enchanted to stave off rust—with long icicles hanging from the undersides of the battlements. Across the courtyard, the sentries and servants eyed the newcomers warily.

Aoth's appearance might be partly to blame, Jhesrhi thought. He had the frame and coloring of a Rashemi, but his shaved scalp and the tattooing that crawled up his neck

and even made a mask of sorts around his luminous blue eyes were characteristically Thayan.

Plump and pretty, with a head of blonde, wind-tousled curls, and clad in yellow vestments, Cera gave the onlookers the kind of lavish, ingratiating smile that Jhesrhi could never have managed on her happiest day.

"The Keeper's blessing upon you all," the priestess said, and swung her hand in an arc that suggested her deity's passage across the heavens. For a moment, the afternoon sunlight brightened, and warmth banished winter's chill. The Rashemi onlookers visibly relaxed.

"We're peaceful travelers from Chessenta," Cera continued. "I'm Cera Eurthos, sunlady of Soolabax. My friends are Aoth Fezim, the sellsword captain; and Jhesrhi Coldcreek, one of his chief lieutenants."

"And we're here to see the Iron Lord," said Aoth, arching his back to stretch muscles stiff from the saddle. The action made his mail coat clink. "Immediately, if possible."

To Jhesrhi's surprise, one of the spearmen flanking the door that led inside the castle smirked.

Aoth noticed it, too. "Did I say something funny?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Captain," the guard replied. "It's just that all of you are in such a hurry when you arrive, and then ... well, it's not my place to explain it. You'll find out soon enough for yourself. Come with me, and I'll see what I can do for you."

"Thanks," Aoth said. He turned back to Jet. "Fly around and find out where they're keeping the griffons. See how many they really have, and what kind of shape they're in."

"Right," Jet replied. With his scarlet eyes burning in his black-feathered head, the familiar turned, trotted several paces with the uneven stride of his kind, lashed his wings, and leaped into the air. A woman with a bucket in her hand let out a little squawk, even though Jet wasn't springing in her direction or threatening anyone at all.

Aoth looked back to the soldier who'd offered to conduct them all inside. "We're ready," he said.

The inside of the castle was somewhat less forbidding than the outside. The Rashemi had softened its stark lines and cavernous gloom with wood carvings, murals mostly innocent of perspective, and hunting trophies. Unimpressed, Jhesrhi cast about for graven sigils, an altar, or some other relic of ancient Nar demonbinding. But she couldn't find any. Maybe the Rashemi had deliberately expunged all such disquieting traces of their predecessors.

But if they had, it wasn't because they were like Chessentans, fearful of any manifestation of the arcane. Periodically, as the sentry led Jhesrhi and her companions deeper into the castle, they encountered women masked in stiff, lacquered cloth, leather, wood, glazed ceramic, copper, or silver. For the most part, the ladies—the famous hathrans, Jhesrhi assumed—carried staves like her own, or wands, orbs, or other implements of the mystic arts. As often as not, they gave her and Cera looks of cool appraisal. They seemed less interested in Aoth, even though he appeared to be the strangest and was at least as formidable a spellcaster as either of his companions.

After one such meeting, Cera elbowed the war mage in the ribs. "See?" she whispered. "It's like I've always heard. The women run things, and the men know their place. I should have come here a long time ago."

Aoth snorted. "I don't see you being happy anyplace where you have to cover that pretty face," he retorted.

"Hm. Should I take that as a compliment on my looks or a criticism of my vanity?" she replied.

Listening to them banter, Jhesrhi pictured Gaedynn's crooked grin, and something twisted in her chest. She clamped down on the feelings that were trying to flower inside her and squeezed them until there was nothing left.

As she attended to that, voices echoed up ahead. Steel rang on steel.

Jhesrhi and her companions entered a spacious, high-ceilinged chamber, lit and warmed by a crackling hearth at either end and filled with a miscellany of folk. There were almond-eyed Shou clad in flowing silk garments and armed with oddly curved blades and halberds. Others, dark-haired, ruddy-skinned humans and slender half-elves, wore the trappings of Aglarond's griffonriders, including winged pewter brooches, and dangling straps that would buckle to their saddles. In contrast to the other groups' uniformity, Bez's sellswords sported whatever clothing, armor, and weapons suited them, although each displayed the red and yellow of the skyship's flag somewhere about their persons. The stocky Rashemi seemed poorly equipped compared to the rest, with only boiled leather vests for armor, but they had plenty of spears, axes, war hammers, and even a fair number of swords.

The clanging came from two fellows practicing cuts and parries using live blades. Swordsmen with more bravado than sense, thought Jhesrhi. Bone dice clattered, and an empty bottle crashed against the wall. A circle of listeners groaned and jeered at the end of a joke or story, and a couple of men even lay snoring on the floor.

Jhesrhi knew little about Rashemen and even less about Thesk. Yet despite the exotic armor, weapons, and styles of clothing on display, and the oddly accented speech that filled her ears, the scene seemed familiar enough to make her feel at home. During her years as a mercenary, she'd often watched soldiers-at-arms lounging around trying to fend off boredom while they were waiting to fight, march, or perform some other task.

By the looks of it, some folk had been stuck in the keep long enough for a degree of friendly feeling to develop among the groups. One of the fencers was a Shou, and the other, a sellsword. Other mercenaries were gambling with griffonriders. Only the Rashemi appeared to be keeping

wholly to themselves while glowering from the quadrant they'd claimed as their own.

"By the Black Flame," said Aoth, his tone disgusted.

"Wait here," the escort said. "I'll ask the Iron Lord if he'll see you." He headed for a door in the far wall that had its own rather bored-looking sentry.

"Fezim!" called a jovial bass voice. Jhesrhi turned to see Mario Bez rising from the circle of dice players squatting on the floor.

Bez was a strapping middle-aged man who would have been handsome if not for a bumpy beak of a nose. He wore his long graying hair tied back in a ponytail. The rapier and dagger hanging on his hips had arcane sigils both incised in the pommels and guards, and running down the scabbards. Jhesrhi suspected that, like Aoth's spear, they served both as weapons of the mundane sort and mystical foci.

"It's grand to see you," said Bez, strutting closer. "Although it's sad that you're still as greedy as when we squabbled over loot down in Turmish."

"Meaning?" Aoth replied.

"You already have griffons of your own, yet you've come to steal this ... flock? No, that can't be the proper term. This *pride* away from me," said Bez, "And not content with the company of one beauty, you arrive with two. Ladies." He reached for Jhesrhi's hand, leering. To bow over it and kiss it, she surmised.

She allowed the fire inside her to leap out and set her hand ablaze. Bez snatched his fingers back.

"Sorry," she said, without bothering to try to sound like she meant it. "I'm just not fond of being touched."

"But I am," Cera purred, proffering her own hand, and sure enough, the sellsword gave it a kiss that lingered a heartbeat longer than necessary. She gave Aoth an impish grin over the top of the other mercenary's head, and he grunted in return.

"All right," said Aoth once Bez had straightened up. "Let's talk business. I need new griffons, and my men and I know how to train them. You have a skyship, and I suspect you *don't* know how to break a griffon to the saddle, or even how to care for one or ride one."

"I can learn," Bez answered. "Would you and the ladies like some firewine? Rashemen is where it comes from, and one thing I've learned during my stay is that the locals hold the best of it back for themselves." He waved the newcomers toward a table with bottles and cups on top of it.

Aoth picked up an open bottle, filled pewter goblets with the dark red wine, and handed them to Cera and Jhesrhi. "But why undertake such a complicated enterprise?" he asked. "Why empty your coffers paying what's bound to be a high price, given the number of bidders? How about if I pay you to climb back aboard the *Storm* and fly away?"

The sellsword shook his head. "Sorry, can't do it," he said. "You know that my crew and I comprise one of the Five Companies of Yaulazna?"

"Yes," replied Aoth. Yaulazna was an earthmote, an island in the sky, afloat over the Great Sea far to the south. Five sellsword bands, each possessed of a skyship, shared it as their base of operations.

"Well," said Bez. "It seems to me that the Five Companies could improve their fortunes by merging into one under the command of their ablest captain."

"And your thought," Cera said, "is that a company of griffonriders will help prove you are that captain."

Bez smiled. "I might have expected a sunlady to prove as insightful as she is lovely," he replied.

Not bothering with a cup, Aoth swigged from the neck of the bottle in his hand. "All right," he said. "If I can't bribe you to go away, how about any of these others? Have you tried?"

"No," replied Bez. "Because as it turns out, all of us who traveled so long and so hard through the winter cold to get

here were laboring under a misconception. This affair isn't a simple matter of bidding and dickering."

"Then what is it?" asked Aoth.

"It's a sacred matter," a new voice growled.

Surprised, Jhesrhi turned, tensing. Sensitive to anyone approaching too near, she generally felt it when someone came up behind her. But the room was so boisterous and crowded that she'd missed it that time.

The voice belonged to a Rashemi warrior, half a head taller than many of his comrades, with a square, clenched jaw and glaring brown eyes. He was wearing some sort of multicolored beadwork regalia, every piece of it sporting a griffon motif. Rearing processions of the beasts ran around his headband and armbands, while one big one leaped from the mountain scene on the front of his vest.

Jhesrhi wondered why he looked so angry.

"This is Vandar Cherlinka," said Bez. "I expect you'll meet any number of hospitable Rashemi during your stay. He's not one of them."

Vandar scowled at the gibe, and Jhesrhi thought she knew why it had hit the mark. As she understood it, the Rashemi held hospitality sacrosanct.

"And what is your story?" asked Aoth, addressing himself to the newcomer.

Perhaps surprised by the other man's mild, reasonable tone, Vandar blinked. But the Rashemi's voice remained as gruff as before. "The griffons are a miracle of the Three," he said. "Never in memory have they bred in such numbers. I lead the Griffon Lodge, and I helped bring the beasts down from the mountains. Nothing could be plainer than that the spirits mean for my brothers and me to ride them in Rashemen's defense. They surely *don't* intend for the Iron Lord to barter them away to outlanders for mere coin. Especially for filthy Bane-worshipping Thayans to turn against us!"

Aoth snorted. "You think I'm Szass Tam's emissary?" he asked. "How would that work, exactly, at a court where any such agent could only expect to be killed on sight? It's true, I was born in Thay, but I renounced that allegiance a long time ago, and the lich would have me tortured and killed if I ever fell into his hands. Now, if the spirits are supposed to decide who gets the griffons, how's that going to happen?"

"What it really means," said Bez, "is that the *hathrans* will decide whose offer to accept. The Iron Lord is just their intermediary in the matter. Rumor has it that they're waiting for a sign."

"I assume," said Aoth to Vandar, "that the Wychlaran have their own seat of power somewhere in town."

The Rashemi's eyes narrowed. "Yes. The Witches' Hall," he replied.

"Then I don't know why all of you are loitering here when you could be making pests of yourselves there instead," said Aoth. "Cera, Jhes, drink up, and we'll pay them a call."

Bez laughed. "They won't see you," he said. "They'll only mark you down as impudent and impious."

Aoth grinned. "Maybe they wouldn't see *you*," he retorted, "but I had the foresight to bring a female priestess and a wizard to Immilmar along with me. We'll improvise some masks for them if we have to."

"This might work," Jhesrhi said. She willed a caul of flame to spring forth from her face.

Vandar recoiled a half step before catching himself with a scowl. Evidently a lodge chieftain wasn't supposed to show fear. Jovial until that moment, Bez narrowed his dark, somewhat bloodshot eyes as though he suddenly believed that Aoth might well succeed in claiming the griffons.

The door in the far wall banged open, and a dozen men, including the guard who'd escorted Jhesrhi and her companions to the hall, swept through. The one in the lead was as tall and as muscular as Vandar, but older, with a sprinkling of white in his close-cropped beard. He wore an

iron circlet on his head, a fine leather doublet with an intricate design hammered in, and deerskin boots that cross-laced up to his knees.

He was almost certainly Mangan Uruk, the Iron Lord. A smallish Shou in a long green gold-trimmed coat and an Aglarondan officer headed straight for him. Ignoring them—and Aoth, Cera, and even Jhesrhi with her mask of fire—he strode straight up to Bez, who tried not to look as surprised by it as everyone else was.

Bez bowed. “Highness—” he began.

“Your ship,” Mangan rapped. “How soon can it take flight?”

“As soon as I give the order,” Bez replied. He was plainly exaggerating, but Jhesrhi suspected only by a little. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” the warlord said. “How badly wrong remains to be seen. A sparrow that brought word died while it was still trying to explain. Either it strained its heart struggling to reach us, or something poisoned it.”

A sparrow that brought word, Jhesrhi thought, marvelling. According to travelers’ tales, Rashemen was supposedly as full of talking animals as it was of Nature spirits. Maybe the stories were true.

“Well,” said Bez, “don’t you worry. I’ll soon have you there to see for yourself.” He raised his voice to a shout. “*Storm of Vengeance!* Get up, you lazy bastards! His Highness needs us!”

Even the more inebriated sellswords scurried to attend their captain. At a shout from the scar-faced half-elf who had to be their commander, the Aglarondans made haste to bestir themselves as well. Though the Iron Lord hadn’t asked them for transport, they plainly meant to accompany him anyway, in the hope of finding a way to ingratiate themselves. Lacking his own means of flying, the Shou in the green and gold coat pleaded with Bez and then the half-elf for a ride. Both ignored him.

Aoth turned to Jhesrhi. "Can you make the wind carry all three of us as you did that night in Luthcheq?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied, frowning.

"Good," Aoth said. "It seems Bez and the Aglarondans mean to make themselves useful and ingratiate themselves with the Iron Lord—and thus, I assume, the witches, too. We need to fly along with them and do our part." People were already streaming out of the chamber. "Come on."

"Take me, too!" Vandar said.

"Sorry," said Aoth. "It would be stupid of me to help a rival."

"All you outlanders are jumping at the chance to serve," Vandar called. "But there are a lot of sellswords in Bez's crew, a lot of Aglarondans, and only three of you. How can you expect to accomplish anything the others can't do better, unless you have a companion who knows this land to help you?"

Aoth hesitated. "There's no way of knowing if that will make a difference," he said.

"But it might," Vandar replied. "Are you afraid that one Rashemi berserker will outshine all you 'sophisticated' southerners?"

Aoth chuckled. "When you put it that way, I don't suppose I am," he said. "Ever flown before?"

"No," Vandar answered.

"Then I *should* bring you along," said Aoth. "Afterward, you may not even *want* the griffons."

T W O

Jet hadn't seen any of his own kind since departing Luthcheq, and the prospect of doing so pleased him. Although to give them their due, humans made for decent company. Indeed, he shared things with them that he never could with his less intelligent kin. But he also possessed nonhuman feelings and perspectives that even Aoth, with their psychic link, could only partly understand.

Spiraling out from Immilmar, Jet found a pride of griffons quickly enough, in a snowy field just north of town. But he also found the soldiers who were tending the beasts; their tents and the banner of Aglarond were planted in the frozen ground. Jet inferred that the simbarchs had dispatched an envoy and his escort to try to buy the wild griffons, and those folk had left their winged mounts just far enough out of town to spare them the constant temptation of horseflesh on the hoof.

As usual, Jet reflected sourly, Aoth had landed them in a situation that was proving to be more complicated than expected. He considered advising the war mage of his discovery, then decided that Aoth had probably already found out this particular bit of bad news for himself.

So Jet simply—and mischievously—screeched a greeting as he flew overhead. Griffons below cried in response and restlessly shook out their wings. Their keepers scurried about, calming them and making sure they wouldn't try to take flight and join their fellow in the sky.

Jet found the feral but ensorcelled griffons, the ones the Rashemi presumably meant to sell, prowling on the white hillsides farther to the east, or soaring and circling above them. His eyes widened at their numbers. It was astonishing that they'd bred or been captured in such profusion, and he had little doubt that wizardry or the whim of a god was involved.

In any case, magic was surely responsible for holding them where they were. As Jet flew nearer, a kind of crackling rawness in the air prickled across his body, while colors brightened or dimmed from moment to moment. A human female in a green robe strolled fearlessly among the huge beasts on the ground. She lifted her masked face to watch his approach. Perhaps it was her task to renew the enchantment and keep it strong.

Jet wondered if he should turn around lest the spell snare him, too. But he didn't feel any compulsion trying to squirm into his mind. And besides, if the magic did take him prisoner, Aoth would surely set him free. He flew on for a closer look.

The witch didn't try to stop him. But one griffon gave a rasping scream, lashed his wings, and leaped up from the ground.

Thanks to Aoth's benign enchantments shaping him from the moment of conception, Jet was different than any normal creature of his kind. Not only was he more intelligent and capable of speech, he was bigger and stronger, with gleaming black feathers and fur and crimson eyes.

For the first time, Jet was looking at a griffon as extraordinary as himself. In fact, the other beast was even larger, with gold-striped wings and brilliant blue eyes instead of the usual yellow.

Since the Rashemi had just taken the beasts from the wild, Jet doubted that a spellcaster had altered the creature. Rather, the magic of that strange northern land itself—where animals talked, and every creek, bush, and tree

supposedly housed a guardian spirit—must have shaped him into the superior being he was.

A superior being who didn't like Jet. Climbing to the same altitude, the gold griffon screamed again, and the rage and challenge in his cry were unmistakable.

Jet understood why. In the wild, griffons were often solitary except when mating or raising cubs. But in areas where game was plentiful, they sometimes formed prides. And of course when they served as mounts for aerial cavalry, they were obliged to live in groups.

In such situations, one griffon generally rose to dominance. And evidently the blue-eyed creature saw Jet the newcomer as a potential threat to his ascendancy.

Jet considered how best to respond. He was still pondering when Aoth spoke to him mind to mind.

We're flying east out of Immilmar, his master said. *Come join us.*

Stay in my head, said Jet, wheeling. *Guide me to you.*

I will, Aoth answered with a hint of humor, *but I don't think you can miss us. It's quite a procession.*

As Jet finished turning, the blue-eyed griffon screamed at what no doubt resembled a display of fear. Other beasts gave vent to their own rasping, scornful cries. Their wings snapped as they flew after him.

A wave of fury swept through Jet. He longed to turn again and prove his strength and courage by tearing the griffon with the gold-streaked wings to shreds. He could savage the whole pride if necessary, until the bloodied survivors cowered before him.

But that was a beast's impulse. Jet was more than a beast, and Aoth needed him. He raced onward. Unable to leave the confines of their invisible cage, the wild griffons soon gave up the chase.

* * * * *

Cera had grown accustomed to riding on Jet, but soaring along across the sky with only “the wind” supporting her was unsettling. Her body kept tensing, certain she was about to fall.

Her mind knew better, of course. Jhesrhi, who had at some point extinguished her mask of fire, might be a morose and taciturn companion—and never more so than in recent weeks—but she was still a faithful friend and a true adept at elemental magic. She wasn’t going to drop anybody.

Cera tried to distract herself by looking around. Aoth was scowling, although probably not because he was worried about a fall. He had magic bound in a tattoo that would ensure a soft landing even if that happened. He just didn’t like not being in control.

Vandar’s beadwork vest fluttered and clinked faintly in the breeze. He had a clenched look that suggested he *was* afraid but determined not to show it. Or maybe he just didn’t want to shudder and have his teeth chatter in the cold. For various reasons, his three companions were either impervious to winter’s chill or could at least render themselves resistant. But the berserker had no such advantage. Cera murmured a prayer to the Keeper to warm him.

Farther away, the *Storm of Vengeance* swept along under sail, including the folding winglike constructions of canvas and wood now projecting from the sides of her hull. The skyship creaked and groaned like a common vessel at sea, and crewmen clambered as nimble as squirrels in her rigging. Mangan Uruk peered ahead from the bow, with Mario Bez at his side.

All around, to the right and left and above and below, twenty or so Aglarondans urged their griffons onward, with shouts and light taps from the butts of their lances.

By the Yellow Sun, it all made for a glorious spectacle. Cera didn’t only love Aoth because her association with him had led her to wonders and excitement that, as a priestess

in a quiet market town, she had never imagined she might experience. But she suspected that *was* a part of it, even though the wonders and excitement had a nasty habit of turning into terrifying danger.

Could she give all that up? Give *him* up? She didn't want to, but, because of the part she'd played in destroying Tchazzar and driving out the wyrnkeepers, her peers might well seek to proclaim her sunlady of all Chessenta. That honor would tie her to the realm for the rest of her life, while the day was bound to come when Aoth and the Brotherhood of the Griffon would move on.

And if she was offered poor Daelric Apathos's office, what else could she think but that it was Amaunator's will? And such being the case, how could she justify turning her back on the god's plan for her?

Cera had agreed to accompany Aoth to Rashemen partly because she hoped the journey would somehow help her see her path clearly. And if not, at least it was another chance to be with him, to make memories she could cherish during what might be lonely years to come.

"There!" Aoth said, jarring her from her reverie. He pointed with his spear.

To the south stood a snow-shrouded stand of oaks and pines, like a detached bit of the great forest Ashenwood, visible as a distant dark mass. A couple of huts stood among the trees, and that was about as much detail as Cera could make out. She surmised, though, that Aoth had spotted signs of trouble, and that was why he was certain that was their destination.

Jhesrhi spoke words in what Cera assumed to be the language of the wind, and they swooped over the grove for a closer look. Flying felt even more like falling. But it only gave Cera a momentary twinge of fear, probably because she was too busy peering for actual danger.

Though she didn't see any, she did spot three witches and an enormous fox sprawled motionless in the cleared area in

front of the huts. One of the women wore a white robe and a mask with a single horn jutting from the brow. She'd apparently pledged herself to the goddess Mielikki, the Forest Queen. Another had on brown and green, and a circlet of little red rosebuds that must have flowered for her in the midst of winter to crown her as a hathran of Chauntea, the Earthmother. The last witch lay cloaked in black and silver and was likely a priestess of Selûne, the Moonmaiden.

Cera at first thought that the fox had been one of the attackers, but she saw that it was facing away from the witches. Such being the case, it seemed more likely that the animal had come to harm trying to protect them.

Cera looked to Jhesrhi. "Please, get me down there," she said. "Someone might still be alive."

"Unfortunately, no," Aoth said. "But we've learned all we can from up here."

On Jhesrhi's command, the wind let them plummet, slowing their descent at what seemed the last possible moment. Cera's boots settled lightly in the snow, and she could see what Aoth had observed from on high. The bodies before her were withered and twisted, and already stank of rot despite the cold. She sighed in pity and disappointment.

When she looked up from the corpses, Aoth, Jhesrhi, and Vandar were peering about, their weapons at the ready. Their priority was to scan for hidden foes, not to examine the fallen. That, Cera reflected, was the difference between truly warlike folk and one who—no matter how many desperate exploits she survived—would always be a cleric and healer in her innermost heart.

With rasping cries and the rustling of wings, the griffons and their Aglarondan masters descended. Less agile in flight, her canvas wings partly folded, the *Storm of Vengeance* was still maneuvering to land beyond the trees while gradually floating lower in the process.

The Aglarondan half-elf with the old white scar creasing his cheek and tugging slightly at the corner of his mouth

glared at Aoth. "All of you, step away from there," he said.

"No," Aoth replied. "Not on *your* order. This isn't Aglarond, and you have no authority. If any of us does, it's the lodge master here, until Mangan Uruk touches down."

Vandar drew himself up straighter. "That's true," he said. "And I say we should be figuring out who committed this outrage, not bickering amongst ourselves."

"Fine," the half-elf snapped. He turned to his men. "We'll work our way through the trees. See what you can find."

As the griffonriders moved off, their mounts prowling beside them like faithful hounds, Aoth gave Vandar a nod. "Thanks for backing me up," he said.

The berserker shrugged. "We agreed that, for the time being, we'd help each other," he replied. "I take it that Folcoerr Dulsær doesn't like you."

"Is that his name?" asked Aoth. "I broke a contract with Aglarond once and fought on the side of its enemy instead. I guess he hasn't forgotten."

"And it doesn't shame you to admit it?" Vandar asked, sneering.

"You don't know anything about it," said Aoth. "And anyway, it has nothing to do with what happened here. Let's work on understanding that. Tell me about that tree." Aoth pointed with his spear to indicate the one he meant.

It was a towering old oak, and Cera winced to behold its current state. The bark was flaking away, and patches of black, slimy rot were eating into the sapwood. The bare branches had twisted into unnatural shapes that reminded her of the contortions of the dead hathrans.

Vandar scowled. "It was the reason this place was sacred," he said. "The reason the witches dwelled here. A wise old spirit lived inside it. If the oak's been killed, I suppose the telthor has been, too." He extended his hand and touched his heart in what Cera took to be a sign of reverence.

"So the point of all this was desecration," she said. The thought made her neck muscles tighten in anger.

“Desecration and plunder,” said Aoth. “I doubt that all three of these women died without a wand or a staff in their hands. And you can see the huts have been ransacked.”

“What I *don’t* see,” Vandar said, “are clear tracks of anyone but the hathrans and the fox.”

“I noticed that, too,” said Aoth. “There are spells to erase a human’s tracks, but they run out of power after a while. That means the Aglarondans have the right idea. If we move out from this point, maybe we can pick up a trail. Cera, stay with me.”

She snorted. “I think I’ve proved I can take care of myself.”

“Well, I think you left your mace and buckler attached to Jet’s saddle,” Aoth said. “I understand you still have your magic, but even so, stick with me.”

“Yes, Captain,” she replied, smiling.

At first, they didn’t find anything but a dead, rotting owl possibly killed by a stray burst of the same malignancy that had slain the hathrans, the fox, and the sacred tree. But then Aoth oriented on a low, dark spot amid a tangle of roots, with a snow-covered hump in the ground behind it.

“That’s a hole,” he said. “And the lump behind it is some sort of old monument. See where the stonework shows through the overgrowth and the snow?”

“No,” Cera said, “but I’m sure you do. Did something climb out of the hole or crawl into it?”

“That I can’t tell. Any chance I can convince you to stay up here?”

“What do you think?” She whispered a prayer and moved her hand in an arc. A golden glimmer ran through her yellow glove. When she entered the dark, the leather would shine with captured sunlight.

“Stay close, then,” Aoth said. He lowered himself onto his belly and squirmed through the curtain of roots. In another moment, his voice came back to her. “I’ve found some stairs,” he called.

When Cera crawled through the roots, she saw steep, narrow steps descending into darkness beyond the reach of her conjured glow. Chunks of stone and bits of dirt littered the upper risers. Once, she surmised, a slab had capped the top of the stairway, perhaps covered with earth to keep it hidden. But something—possibly simply the weight of time, or the slow insistence of the growing roots—had broken it.

“Ready?” asked Aoth, keeping his voice low.

“If you are,” she replied.

Keeping his spear level, he headed downward. She followed.

The steps brought them to a place where one stone passage curved away to the right, its counterpart curved to the left, and a third one extended straight ahead. Rows of square slabs studded the wall, each graven with hieroglyphs that Cera couldn’t read. But in some places, there were no such stoppers, just empty holes revealing sockets the approximate size and shape of coffins.

“It’s a tomb,” Cera said.

“I think so,” said Aoth. “An old one, though whether Nar, Raumathari, or something else, I don’t know. Watch out for guardians and traps.”

She did, but as it turned out, she needn’t have bothered. If the dead had ever had a sentry, it had deserted its post or crumbled to dust long ago. Likewise, if there had ever been contrivances to drop an intruder into a pit or to pop a blade stabbing out of the wall, the mechanisms had stiffened and corroded into immobility.

The place turned out to be laid out in a circle, with two straight passages crossing in the center like the spokes of a wheel. At that hub, a sarcophagus carved with the form of a sleeping man in scale armor and an odd jagged crown reposed on a pedestal.

Aoth looked it over, then shrugged. “If it’s been opened recently, I can’t tell it,” he said.

“So what do we have?” Cera asked. “Anything?”

“Not as far as I can see,” he replied. “There’s nothing down here, and no way out except the way we came in. On top of that, we have to assume that the witches and the oak spirit knew the tomb was here and weren’t worried about it. So by all indications, it had nothing to do with the attack.”

“Then let’s go back up and see if anybody else has found anything,” she said.

“Good idea,” he replied, starting toward the passage that ran back to the staircase. Suddenly he pivoted.

Her heart beat quicker, and she looked where he was peering. “What?” she called.

He pointed with the spear. “There,” he said.

Three small vertical grooves had been carved above the arch that led to one of the other straight corridors. Glad that Aoth hadn’t spotted a pouncing specter or something similar, Cera sighed and asked, “What about them?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know,” he replied. “But every other bit of carving we’ve seen has been on either a slab or the sarcophagus there. These are the only marks on a plain patch of wall.”

“That is funny,” she said. “But you said yourself we don’t even know who built this tomb. We certainly don’t know what their traditions were. And we explored that passage the same as the others. There was nothing different about it.”

“True enough,” he replied. “Let’s get out of here.”

By the time they had crawled back out into the winter sunlight, the *Storm of Vengeance* had landed, and Mangan and Bez stood by the huts and the dead hathrans conferring with Dulsær, Jhesrhi, and Vandar. With the snow crunching beneath his boots, Aoth brushed more of it off his chest and tramped to join the parley. Cera hurried after him.

“Can’t you wizards reveal the trail?” the Iron Lord growled.

Jhesrhi shifted her grip on her new staff, a length of brass, graven with runes and octagonal in cross section. “I can try,”

she said, "but it will take me awhile, and I can't promise results. That kind of magic isn't my specialty."

"Nor mine," said Bez, "nor that of any mage aboard my ship. We're war wizards, not diviners."

"If sorcery is of no use," Dulsær said, pulling the wings of his leather fleece-lined cape together against the cold, "then let's try thinking. The enemy likely moved and attacked by night. But it isn't night now, and they'd be reckless indeed to wander around in open country in the daylight. Where could they hide?"

Mangan frowned. "The Ashenwood's the obvious place," he said. "It's nearby, and a haunt for trolls and ettercaps, among other things."

"From what I understand," the half-elf said, "it's also dense enough that a band of warriors might reasonably hope to conceal themselves there. Thayan marauders, perhaps." He glanced in Aoth's direction.

"Interesting notion," Aoth replied. "Have you worked out how such raiders would stay hidden marching hundreds of miles north from the Gorge of Gauros?"

Dulsær scowled. "I concede that a Thayan war party is only one possibility," he said. "My point is this: My men and I can search for the enemy from the air. The fact that the branches have dropped their leaves should help considerably." He turned to Mangan. "We'll find the killers, Highness, and punish them as they deserve."

Bez nodded. "Naturally, the *Storm* will participate, too."

"You'll discover," the Aglarondan said, "that one skyship can't cover ground the way twenty griffonriders can."

"Maybe so," the sellsword said, smiling, "but at least I know I can count on you Aglarondans to summon me for the actual fighting. I mean, considering that His Highness is riding aboard my vessel. You surely aren't planning to attack without involving him."

"Of course not," Dulsær snapped.

“Let’s move out,” Mangan said, and in another moment, Dulsær and Bez were both bellowing commands. The other Aglarondans led their screeching griffons to spots where gaps in the branches overhead would make it easy to ascend. Several sellswords scrambled to collect the bodies of the hathrans and even the fox. The rest trotted for their ship.

Vandar rounded on Aoth and Jhesrhi. “What are you waiting for?” he asked. “Call another wind.”

Aoth shook his head. “No need,” he said. “We’re not going.”

Vandar gaped at him. “Why not?” he asked.

“Is it something to do with the tomb?” Cera asked. “The markings?”

“Maybe,” said Aoth. At that moment, a cloud blew across the face of the sun, and in the sudden dimness, his luminous blue eyes seemed to flare brighter. “Maybe not. But I have a hunch or two. Everyone wonders how the killers departed without leaving a trail. But what if there’s no trail because somehow, some way, they never left?”

“And we missed seeing them?” Jhesrhi asked. “Is that possible with your truesight?”

“Even I don’t see everything,” said Aoth. “Anyway, ask yourself, what’s the point of defiling a place of power?”

“Maybe just to spoil it for people you hate,” Cera said. “But sometimes to taint the power for use in a darker form of magic.”

“Right,” Aoth said, nodding. “So maybe, after Mangan and the others have gone away, and the sun sets, the killers will come out of hiding—or sneak back to the grove if they really did withdraw to somewhere else—to do that. We’re going to be here to meet them.”

Vandar scowled. “I’m not,” he said. “That all sounded like so much guesswork for me. I’m going with the others.”

“You can try to beg a ride,” said Aoth, “but I doubt you’ll have any better luck than the Shou did. And even if someone takes pity on you, and even if the others actually

locate the enemy, how will you show off your kind of prowess while the Aglarondans are loosing arrows and Bez's sellswords are hurling blasts of flame and lightning from on high? Staying here gives you a chance to prove your worth."

Glowing, Vandar stood and pondered. Eventually, he said, "I'll stay. But you'd better be right."

A huge black shape plunged down from on high. Cera jumped, and Vandar jerked his javelin up over his shoulder for throwing.

"What did I miss?" Jet rasped.

* * * * *

Riding Jet above the grove, Aoth felt a chill. With a touch and a thought, he roused the magic of one of his tattoos. The result was only a feeble, fleeting pulse of warmth. He'd invoked the enchantment too often. Its strength would renew itself, but not quickly enough to do him much good tonight.

You humans are so delicate, said Jet. He wheeled for another pass, and his ebony feathers reflected a glint of Selûne's silvery light. It reminded Aoth of the Moonmaiden's servant lying twisted and rotting in her black and argent mantle, and he felt a stab of anger.

He supposed that was stupid if not downright unprofessional. After all, he'd never even met the woman, and there couldn't be many people across the length and breadth of Faerûn who'd seen more slaughtered corpses than he had. But still, at that moment, the thought of a priestess slain by magic troubled him. Chathi had died that way.

He still missed her occasionally, even after a hundred years. He wondered if he would soon be missing Cera, too, once the other sunladies and lords decided to elevate her as she deserved. They were going to choose Daelric's successor at Greengrass, so—

Motion in the trees below jolted him from his musings.

Darkness was nearly the same as light to him, while distance was far less of a hindrance than it was to other men. Still, trying to see through crisscrossed branches, and peering down from overhead, it was hard to make out much more than the tops of hoods. But over the course of several heartbeats, the details started coming clear.

Swaying and stepping in unison, as though to music only they could hear, a line of robed women was weaving toward the huts and the blighted tree. Given their location, it was conceivable they'd crawled up out of the ancient tomb. Aoth found that possibility perplexing, but not as troubling as the fact that they were masked.

What in the name of the deepest Hell? he thought. Is there such a thing as an outlaw hathran? A traitor hathran?

Without a doubt, said Jet. Don't you know your own species?

Wolves prowled among the masked women. So did vague, flowing shapes like the shadows of wolves. Aoth's frown deepened. The phantoms reminded him of creatures he'd fought during the War of the Zulkirs, darkness itself given form and a mockery of life by necromantic arts.

He tensed as the procession neared its destination. One petty drawback of inhumanly keen eyesight was that it was sometimes difficult to judge just how well a comrade had succeeded in concealing himself. Despite crouching behind cover and all but burying themselves in snow, Cera, Jhesrhi, and Vandar were plainly visible to him. He breathed a sigh of relief when none of the enemy paid them any attention. The witches seemingly had no idea that the clear patch of ground was surrounded.

They did set sentries, though, albeit in a haphazard fashion. The wolves, corporeal and otherwise, prowled, sniffed, and peered out into the trees. The witches—Aoth counted thirteen altogether—arranged themselves in a

semicircle in front of the ruined oak and started a moaning incantation.

Aoth frowned, because the dismal wail had a muffled, faraway quality. Even as he listened, he could almost doubt that he was truly hearing anything at all, except, maybe, the beginnings of madness echoing inside his head. The air grew colder.

They're working necromancy right now, Aoth concluded. *Or they're undead themselves.*

Or both, answered Jet.

For a while, the masked women only moaned. Then they started making beckoning motions toward the tree, curling what Aoth now observed to be gray, shriveled fingers. The patches of rot seethed and bubbled, and the the whole oak writhed. More bark flaked from the trunk, and twigs fell from the branches.

Suddenly, a figure lurched from the tree like a drunkard stumbling over a rut in the street.

The entity was twice as tall as any of the undead hathrans—for Aoth was virtually certain that's what they were—and seemingly made of a blur of greenish phosphorescence. Or most of it was. As the oak had pockets of decay eating into it, the insubstantial giant had bits and patches of darkness blemishing its form.

The giant flailed its hand at the witches, but the blow passed harmlessly over their heads. The only effect was to cost Vandar's "wise old spirit"—for that it surely was, not slain after all, but wounded and crippled—its balance, and it dropped noiselessly to its knees. A couple of the flesh-and-blood wolves snarled, howling at its helplessness and humiliation. This display of cruel mirth led Aoth to consider the possibility that the beasts were actually werewolves.

One of the witches silenced them with a snap of her fingers before she and her sisters resumed their moaning. The patches of shadow inside the giant expanded, sending

inky tendrils slithering through the glow, as the spirit hung its head and shuddered.

Aoth wondered how long to let the witches continue. He and his comrades were apt to learn quite a bit as they watched. Yet they couldn't allow the oak spirit to be killed, enslaved, or corrupted in some fundamental way.

He was still considering the matter when Vandar screamed a war cry that was a fair imitation of a griffon's screech, sprang up from under the pine where he'd lain concealed, and charged. He'd taken off his beadwork regalia, perhaps to not risk it getting damaged or bloodstained.

Startled, the witches and their four-footed servants froze for a moment. It gave the berserker—who certainly appeared berserk at that moment—a chance to land a cut to the head of one of the corporeal wolves. The beast fell down but rolled to its feet again, its resistance to common steel confirming Aoth's suspicion.

Idiot! said Jet with a snarl.

Aoth agreed. He hadn't been too worried about the undead witches' superior numbers or their presumably potent magic to that point, because he'd intended that he and his allies would make a coordinated surprise attack. But that couldn't happen anymore.

Of course, Aoth thought, some folk might say that the effects of Vandar's recklessness weren't all bad, because Vandar wasn't really a comrade. He was a competitor, and Aoth's mission would be that much simpler if the Rashemi didn't survive the consequences of his folly. But even as the thought flickered through his mind, he was already aiming his spear; and Jet, discerning his actual intent, was diving.

Aoth spoke a word of command, and darts of blue light hurtled from the head of his weapon into the body of the wounded werewolf. The shapeshifter collapsed, but unlike with Vandar's attack, didn't jump back up.

Staying crouched behind a pine tree, Jhesrhi made a jabbing motion with her staff. The brass glowed, and so did

her golden eyes, while the evergreen boughs brushing against the metal charred. Flames leaped from the tip of an arcane weapon, annihilating one of the shadow wolves, then jumping to set a werewolf ablaze.

Cera stood straight up and stepped out into the open. Swinging her gilded mace over her head, she shouted, "Your time is past!"

Light flared around her, as though, in the middle of the night, she was nonetheless standing in sunshine. A shadow wolf lunging at Vandar's flank withered away to nothing, and several of the witches recoiled.

But one of the undead didn't flinch: a witch who had nearly completed a spell. Glaring in Vandar's direction, her voice rose on the final syllables of her incantation, as she brandished an orb of black crystal over her head.

Jet leveled out from his dive and hurtled at her. His talons slammed into her body, yanked her off her feet, and dragged her across the cleared area. In the process of tearing free, his claws ripped the witch apart.

With a reflexive stab of alarm, Aoth saw that Jet didn't have enough room to climb back up into the sky. The clear space wasn't long enough, and the familiar was going too fast.

Relax, said Jet. He furled his wings, and he and his master plunged to earth just a couple of paces shy of the tree with which they'd been about to collide.

The griffon whirled to confront the foes rushing to attack. A ghostly wolf sprang, and he met it with a snap of his beak.

Unfortunately, the shadow beast's insubstantial nature protected it. It plunged right through the griffon's beak and sank its fangs into his chest. Thanks to their psychic link, Aoth felt the resulting burst of frigid pain.

But he couldn't afford to pay attention to it. He had to trust the griffon to deal with the close combat while he fought the witches hanging back to attack at range.

There were three of them. The one on the left wore brown robes and a wooden mask through which her milky eyes peered. She was pointing a dagger at him. The witch in the middle sported a black cloak and hood sewn with an overlay of dangling bones. Her mask was a leering skull face that had evidently come from a real skull. In contrast to the others, the third witch had thrown back her cloak to reveal a spindly form clad only in a steel mask and a ragged, mold-spotted shift. Intricate tattooing crawled on every inch of her exposed gray skin.

All three were already chanting and sweeping their arcane foci through mystic passes. Aoth discharged another of the ones stored inside his spear.

A curtain of flying slashing blades flashed into existence and flew toward the trio. The witch with the milky eyes and the one cloaked in bones reeled out of the spell's effect with clothes and flesh tattered. The former's left arm hung useless, all but severed. But the tattooed hathran sprang clear like a cat, before any of the blades could touch her. She snarled the final word of her spell and clenched her fist.

A cloud of swirling vapor burst into existence around Aoth. His eyes burned, flooding with blinding tears. The same fire seared him from his nostrils and his lips all the way down into his chest. He coughed and choked, unable to catch his breath.

Aoth activated the tattoo he wore to counter poison, slapping at it through his mail. The burning abated for him, but he could still feel the echo of Jet's distress.

The griffon spread his wings, lashed them, and leaped, carrying them clear of the cloud. Shaking, he retched and spat.

Are you all right? asked Aoth.

Fine! the griffon said with a snarl. *Just don't let them do it again!*

Aoth could tell the griffon wasn't fine. He, himself, could barely breathe and barely see. But Jet was right. There was

no time for anything but battle.

Blinking, Aoth cast about for the trio of undead hathrans. Residual sickness from the poison and dazzling flashes—Jhesrhi and Cera fighting their own foes with conjured fire and sunlight—made it harder to find them than it should have been. The first thing to catch his eye was a corpse lying in the fog cloud, slowly warping from wolf back into man, while a pair of lupine shadows charged out of the vapor after Jet. Vandar, painted with blood from at least two wounds, swung his sword and cut a hathran's neck.

Finally, Aoth located his particular foes in the flickering, lunging chaos. He leveled his spear and rattled off an incantation. A blast of wind sent the witch with the nearly severed arm staggering back amid the flying blades, still slashing away in the area where he'd placed them. There came a rapid *thunk-thunk-thunk* as the magic hacked her to pieces.

One down! But at that same instant, the hathran with the mantle of bones thrust out her withered arm, and a ragged flare of darkness exploded from the tips of her jagged nails.

Aoth invoked the protective power of another tattoo. He didn't think there was anything else he could do. But though Jet was still half blind, defending by sheer instinct against shadow wolves that kept darting in, biting, and retreating, the griffon nonetheless perceived the witch's threat. With another great spring and beating of his wings, he leaped above the magic that, an instant later, splintered the front of the hut like a barrage of razors. And he landed right in front of the creature who'd cast it.

The witch flourished her cape. Bones tore loose from it and battered Aoth like sling stones. Crying out at the pain, he charged his spear with destructive power and thrust.

The head of the weapon flared blue as it drove deep into the witch's chest. With a thunderous boom, force blasted out from the point of penetration and tore her body to shreds.

Jet whirled to confront the shadow wolves again. As he did so, Aoth glimpsed Cera hurling a shaft of light from the spherical head of her mace. Meanwhile, a second mace—seemingly made of radiance and wielded by an invisible hand—bashed a werewolf and held it away from her. Jhesrhi, standing straight and tall, had wrapped herself in blue and yellow flame from head to toe and was engaging the undead witches in a duel of spells.

Aoth located his remaining opponent just as the tattooed lines leaped from her flesh in a flying tangle. The leading edge of the spell's effect lashed him like whips before settling on him like a wire net.

The strands slithered around him and started to draw tight. He snarled words of power, and, straining against the constriction, sought to drag his hand through the proper mystic figure. The undead creature raised her hands high, her rotting skin hanging in rags—freeing the tattoos that had all but flayed her. As she lashed her hands down, they blurred into the hands of a troll, too large for her arms, with greenish hide and long claws.

The hathran screamed and sprang over Jet's head. But at that instant, Aoth completed his counterspell. The animated mesh sizzled out of existence.

He snapped his spear into line and impaled the witch. He sent power surging through the weapon and blasted her apart.

He felt an instant of savage satisfaction. But the feeling crashed into dismay as Jet collapsed beneath him, and a feeling of cold, numb weakness flooded across their psychic link.

Aoth had to get out of the saddle lest he end up pinned under the griffon's body. He willed the straps holding him in place to unbuckle themselves, heaved himself clear, and slammed down into the snow.

At once, a hathran in a fanged, slant-eyed mask loomed over him, but Vandar rushed at her and distracted her. Aoth

floundered to his feet and, furious at what the creatures had done to Jet, leveled his spear at the shadow wolves that were still tearing at the griffon.

The beasts rounded on Aoth and charged. He infused the head of his spear with blazing, crackling lightning and met the first with a thrust to the chest that burned the creature from existence.

The other lunged inside his reach and tried to snap its fangs shut on his arm. But although mere steel links couldn't have kept them out of his flesh, the enchantments bound in the metal did. Aoth dropped the spear, growled a word that concentrated stinging power in his fist, and hammered it down on the phantom creature's head. The creature withered away to nothing.

Aoth automatically cast about, making sure no new foe was advancing to attack him, then touched Jet's mind with his own. The familiar was alive but unconscious, and in urgent need of care.

Cera could provide it, but she, Jhesrhi, and Vandar were still fighting. Aoth pivoted and snarled incantations, scarcely pausing between one and the next, as he hurled darts of light and booming thunderbolts until every last hathran, werewolf, and shadow beast was gone.

Gasping and stumbling, Cera hurried to Jet's side. Vandar and Jhesrhi followed. The Rashemi looked shaky and spent with his rage having run its course, and he was finally feeling the effects of the superficial but bloody cuts in his scalp and forearm. Only Jhesrhi appeared untouched by all that had transpired as she snuffed her aura of flame.

"What happened?" Cera asked. She dropped to her knees beside the griffon that, even crumpled in the snow, made her look as small as a child by comparison.

"The shadow wolves," Aoth said.

"Will he be all right?" Vandar asked.

"You'd better hope he will be," said Aoth. "Why in the name of the Black Hand did you attack before I gave the

signal?"

"I don't take orders from you!" Vandar snapped, before taking a breath. "But understand, the fury is a gift of the spirits, and sometimes it takes us when *they* will it. I think maybe the oak telthor raised it in me because he couldn't have lasted much longer."

Aoth realized he'd forgotten all about the ghostly giant. He glanced in the direction of the blighted tree and discovered the apparition had disappeared. "I don't care about your stinking spirit," he said.

"Enough!" Cera said. "Both of you, be quiet and let me work."

She whispered a prayer, and her hands glowed as she laid them on Jet's flank. She moved them to his neck—specifically, to another spot where a shadow beast had bitten the griffon, Aoth surmised, although he didn't know how she could tell—and did the same thing there. Then she infused the tip of a wing with Amaunator's healing light.

Gradually, the magic did its work. Aoth could feel the change in Jet as the oblivion of near-death gave way to ordinary sleep.

Aoth took a deep breath, then let it out again. "You did it," he said. "He's going to be all right."

"I know," Cera replied, stroking Jet's head. Grunting, she tried to stand. Aoth helped her. She looked at Vandar and said, "I have a little power left. Enough to tend you, too."

"Do that," said Aoth. "Then the two of you stay with Jet. Jhesrhi and I are going to go and check on something."

As he led her into the trees, the wizard said, "I'm glad Jet's going to live."

"He's too cantankerous to die," Aoth replied. "Do you ever wonder why no matter where we go anymore, we end up fighting the undead?"

The bare hint of a smile tugged at the corners of Jhesrhi's mouth for a moment, then vanished. "I take it we're going to

see if they crawled out of the tomb you and Cera found," she said. "Or if we can figure out where else they came from."

"Yes," Aoth replied. "Once again, some footprints would be helpful."

Jhesrhi shrugged. "Undead, even the ones that still have a physical form, tend to be good at sneaking around," she said. "Werewolves, too, I imagine. They may not even have needed a spell to avoid making tracks."

"That still doesn't explain why, if they came from outside the grove, Jet and I didn't see them when we were flying around above the treetops." Aoth said.

They reached the spot where the hole led into the tomb. Aoth crawled in, the gnarled roots catching on his clothing and in the links of his mail. Jhesrhi followed and set the head of her brass staff burning like a torch. They stalked on down the stairs, only to find the same vacant, echoing passages he and Cera had explored before.

And as before, he and his companion ended up in the hub by the sarcophagus when their search was done. He resisted a childish impulse to kick it.

* * * * *

Uramar studied the stocky, tattooed war mage with the luminous blue eyes and the tall, golden-haired elemental with the fiery staff. It wasn't difficult. As people commonly reckoned distance, they were only a couple of paces away. In another, equally valid sense, they and their frustration occupied a completely different world.

From their remarks to one another, Uramar gathered that the frustration stemmed partly from the fact that the tattooed man was accustomed to seeing whatever existed to be seen. But at the moment, it was his misfortune to be looking for something invisible to *any* form of vision, even truesight.

Uramar's invisibility gave him an advantage. He could spring forth and strike by surprise. As his hands clenched on the hilt of his greatsword, an assortment of his broken souls whispered to him.

"Kill them ..."

"It will be easy ..."

"Kill them, reanimate them, and then they can serve our cause ..."

But as was often the case, other voices disagreed.

"No. You saw how formidable they are ..."

"If there was only one, yes, but there are two ..."

"Don't risk giving away our secrets. A better opportunity will surely come along ..."

For a moment, the clamor set pain throbbing in Uramar's temples, and he staggered a step and groaned. Then the contradiction resolved itself, and he knew that he should indeed wait.

Such being the case, there was no point in letting proximity to the mortals tantalize the more bloodthirsty parts of his nature any further. He turned and crept away. Instinct made him silent even though he knew that really, the folk behind him wouldn't notice even if he shouted at the top of his mismatched lungs.

T H R E E

Jhesrhi had noticed that few structures in Immilmar looked particularly new. Apparently Rashemi saw little reason to put up a new building until an old one had rotted out and fallen down. But even by local standards, the whitewashed longhouse called the Witches' Hall had an air of antiquity about it. It was easy to believe that the dragons, unicorns, and hounds carved under the eaves had glared their forbiddance at the first Iron Lord to walk the city's muddy, unpaved streets.

And forbiddance it would surely have been, for as the summons had made clear, even when the Wychlaran saw fit to call nonhathrans to their sanctuary, that didn't mean they were invited *into* the sacred precincts of the hall. As Jhesrhi, Aoth, and Cera approached, a masked woman stepped forward from her post before the front entrance and gestured for the newcomers to follow her.

She led them around to the south side of the longhouse, where someone had either dug out a small amphitheater or had taken advantage of a natural depression in the ground to fashion one. Somebody had removed some of the snow, too, but Jhesrhi suspected the plank benches would still make cold, damp seating for those who, unlike her, didn't have fire flowing in their veins.

"By the Pure Flame," Aoth muttered.

When Jhesrhi glanced around, she saw what had annoyed him. She knew he'd hoped the summons was for him and his comrades alone, or at worst for them, Vandar, and other representatives of the Griffon Lodge. Plainly that wasn't the case, for Dai Shan, the leader of the Shou, and Mario Bez were approaching, each accompanied by several of his men. The skyship captain shot Aoth a grin as he made a point of claiming a seat right beside him.

"The heroes of the day," Bez said. "Congratulations."

"We were ready for them," Aoth replied with a shrug.

"Still, even for dragon slayers, it can't have been easy to contend with undead spellcasters *and* superior numbers," the captain said. "You should have told me what you intended. I could have spared a few men to stay and lie in wait with you."

"And win the *Storm of Vengeance* a share of the credit if the killers actually did show up?" Cera asked.

Bez spread his hands in mock dismay. "Sunlady, you wound me," he said. "Naturally, my concern would have been your safety, and Lady Jhesrhi's."

Jhesrhi decided there was no reason to pay further attention to what Bez had to say. He was more than likely sniffing for information—which Aoth and Cera were too wary to give him—and his was the sort of oblique, bantering conversation that made her feel tongue-tied and dull. Well, except sometimes, when it was Gaedynn ...

With a scowl, Jhesrhi pushed the archer's face with its shrewd eyes and flippant smirk out of her mind. In search of distraction, she watched Mangan Uruk, Vandar, and Folcoerr Dulsær arrive. The berserker wore his beadwork regalia, and the half-elf had a sneer for each of his rivals.

Almost as soon as everyone had found a seat, they all had to stand up again as masked witches filed out of the longhouse.

They were not alone. Ghostly telthors flew, padded, bounded, scurried, or crawled along with them. In that first

moment, Jhesrhi made out a hawk, a vulture, two bears, a squirrel, an otter, and a snake. Many of the creatures flickered, visible one instant and gone the next. None left any tracks in the snow. Their profusion reminded Jhesri that Rashemen was filled with nature spirits.

A number of the smaller familiars accompanied their mistresses to their seats on the benches. The others looked down on the assembled humans from the top of the amphitheater, or perched on the limbs of nearby trees.

One hathran had no phantom companion that Jhesrhi could see. Clad in a simple leather mask and brown hooded robe, she remained standing at the bottom of the amphitheater, and, when she was ready, slashed a bluewood wand through an intricate figure. Nothing overt happened as a result. Maybe it was simply a way of asking the gods to bless the gathering, for a hathran's arts were a mixture of the priestly and the arcane. It was a disorderly hodgepodge to Jhesrhi's way of thinking, but maybe she wasn't giving the barbarians enough credit.

"Be seated," said the witch. She had a cold contralto voice that carried well. "Many of you know me, but not all. I'm Yhelbruna. With the help of Vandar Cherlinka, I brought the griffons down from the mountains. I'm also the one who cast the runes and determined that it isn't necessarily the will of the spirits that this living treasure remain in Rashemen, disappointing and bewildering as that seemed. Word of the beasts' existence, the news that drew Aglarondans, Theskians, and sellswords here, went out at my behest.

"At times," she continued, an unexpected wry note entering her voice, "I regretted that action, for you travelers began to arrive, and, to my embarrassment and the Iron Lord's, I still had no clear idea of the spirits' plan for the griffons. But in light of recent events, and after prayer and meditation, I do now."

Aoth leaned forward. Cera took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

Bez called, "Who gets the animals, then? Don't keep us in suspense."

Although their masks, voluminous garments, and air of aloof dignity made it difficult to be certain, Jhesrhi had the feeling that some of the hathrans were taken aback that he'd had the temerity to speak without permission.

Yhelbruna, however, answered without any show of resentment. "I have no wish to keep you in suspense, Captain, and I promise I'll give you an answer soon enough," she said. "But there are things you need to hear first in order to understand it."

Aoth snorted. Leaning toward Cera, and Jhesrhi on the other side of her, he whispered, "Someday a matter will be simple and straightforward again, and we'll realize we've forgotten how to react."

"For about a year," Yhelbruna continued, "the undead have been troubling Rashemen. This, of course, is scarcely a unique occurrence. Our land is rich in magic and old as well. In ages past, it was home to folk who trafficked with dark powers. It's the kind of place where the dead are going to wake and walk from time to time.

"Still, of late, there's simply been too much of it. The ghosts and revenants have been too powerful, and too intent on doing harm for harm's sake."

Dulsaer shook his head. "Aren't they always 'intent on doing harm for harm's sake?' " he said.

"Actually, no," said Aoth, "not always. Although they may have vile hungers to satisfy, and an innate viciousness that prompts them to attack anyone they happen to encounter. But I get the feeling High Lady Yhelbruna is talking about more than that."

The hathran nodded. "I am," she said. "On our journey into the High Country, Vandar and I encountered an undead hag and some zombie goblins going to considerable trouble to break a Raumathari demon trap, for no discernible reason other than malice. There have been a number of similar

incidents, including the recent outrage in the sacred grove, which was probably the most flagrant example of all.”

Dai Shan cocked his head and placed his rather delicate-looking hands together, fingertip to fingertip. “How so, wise priestess?” he asked.

“In the last century,” Yhelbruna said, “we Wychlaran had a falling out among ourselves. Some of our sisters, who came to be called the durthans, turned to commerce with wicked spirits and the fey, and formed their own secret sorority in our midst. And when we started to unmask them, they fled to strongholds in the wilderness, where they plotted to seize the control of the realm. When the opportunity presented itself—as it did when our foes the Thayans started fighting among themselves—we had no choice but to stamp them out.”

Dulsaer nodded. “I’ve heard something about this ‘Witch War of Rashemen,’ ” he said.

“Indeed,” said Yhelbruna, although with a hint of distaste in her tone, as if she found the name vulgar. “And I’m bringing it up because we’ve identified the creatures who attacked the grove.”

Apparently restless, a transparent jay with a streaked crown fluttered up from a copper-masked hathran’s shoulder. A misty adder coiled in its mistress’s lap lifted its wedge-shaped head to track the other telthor’s flight.

“I take it,” Vandar said, “that they were durthans when they were alive.”

“Yes,” Yhelbruna answered. “A formidable coven that caused a great deal of misery working from a lair in the Erech Forest. When we finally found them, killed them, and buried them, we took considerable pains to ensure that they wouldn’t rise again.”

Jhesrhi made a little spitting sound. “Incompetents,” she whispered. “They should have burned the corpses.”

Or at least she thought she had whispered. But to her surprise and embarrassment, Yhelbruna replied to her.

"You're right," said the witch. "But some of the women had been fine hathrans before they turned down the wrong path. So we chose to lay them to rest with the rites that are due a hathran, and the fact of the matter is, no one should ever have been able to find them, let alone reanimate them."

"Yet apparently someone did," Cera said. "Or else they came back because of some other influence."

"And that's not the extent of the mystery," Yhelbruna said. "We buried them in the Erech Forest, which is to say, in the northwest, on the other side of Lake Ashane. How, then, did they make their way to the outskirts of the Ashenwood without being detected?"

"Flying by night?" Dulsær suggested. "Surely at least a few of you witches have mastered that particular magic."

"Possibly," Yhelbruna said, "although by day or night, we hathrans have watchers in the sky. Still, why come so far?"

"Because the oak spirit only lives a stone's throw from Immilmar," said Aoth. "If I wanted to scare and demoralize the realm, I'd strike in this area if I could manage it."

"Interesting," said Yhelbruna. "You outlanders all have your own ways of seeing and thinking, and perhaps that's what we need."

Scowling, Mangan Uruk rose. "High Lady, no one respects your wisdom more than I do," he said. "And I respect our guests. But I have to say one more time that I don't like this. Rashemen doesn't need sellswords."

"Yet you yourself pressed Captain Bez's skyship into service," the hathran replied.

The Iron Lord hesitated. "That was a special situation," he said. "I saw a need to reach the grove faster than a horse could run."

"And it's possible we need *all* of the outlanders' capabilities," Yhelbruna said. "All their insights, magic, and methods of making war. Believe me, I don't take any satisfaction in the thought. How could I? We Wychlaran are as proud of our skills as you warriors are of yours. But the

truth of the matter is that our problem is growing worse, and neither of us has been able to solve it. We mustn't let pride keep us from obtaining help from those the spirits sent to give it."

"So what you're saying," said Aoth, "is that you want to hire us to put a stop to your infestation of undead, and the payment will be the griffons."

"The Three have instructed the Wychlaran to proclaim a quest to benefit the realm," answered the hathran. "They also provided a reward for those who fulfill it."

"What if more than one group plays a part in solving your problem?" asked Bez.

"We'll turn the griffons over to all who do, and you can divide them as you see fit," she replied.

"Or dice for the lot of them, or fight a duel," the skyship captain said. "I suppose that will work."

"High Lady," called Dulsær, springing to his feet. "Surely you don't mean to ask a Thayan wizard for help when Rashemen is under attack *by necromancy*."

"We've been through this," Aoth replied. "In the first place, I'm Szass Tam's enemy more than you'll ever be. In the second, I doubt Thayan agents are waking the dead this far north of the border. Especially if no one's spotted legions mustering on the far side of the Gorge of Gauros for an attack."

Cera grinned at the half-elf. "And in the third place, what's the matter?" she said. "Are you afraid of the competition?"

Dulsær glared and opened his mouth for what he likely intended to be a savage retort. Yhelbruna cut him off: "All of you are here by the will of the Three," she said.

"Then that includes me and my lodge brothers," Vandar said, rising like the others. "I'm not an outlander with foreign 'insights, magic, and methods of making war.' But you know better than anyone that I've been in this from the start. I helped preserve the demon trap, I helped catch the griffons, I helped save the oak spirit—"

"After making the job harder than it needed to be," Aoth murmured.

"—and I demand the right to try to win the griffons."

Yhelbruna looked back at Vandar in silence for a moment. In fact, it seemed to Jhesrhi that everything had fallen silent, like the world was holding its breath.

"If I recall correctly," the hathran said at length, "the last male to *demand* anything of an assembly of the Wychlaran hopped away from this very amphitheater on four webbed feet."

The berserker took a breath. "Still, I do demand it," he said.

"Then it's just as well that we meant to include you anyway," Yhelbruna said, with perhaps the slightest hint of humor in her voice. "This is chilly weather for frogs."

"It appears, then," Dai Shan said, "that we understand our task, and we know who else intends to strive for the greater glory of this noble land."

"Please," said Dulsær, sneering. "The sellswords and berserkers are at least soldiers of a sort. You Theskiens are merchants. What are you going to do? Bribe the undead to go away?"

The small Shou in his long green coat rose. He turned to face Dulsær and spread his hands. Shadows, hitherto scarcely noticeable in the afternoon sunlight, stretched and darkened, and gloom gathered in the air. Dai Shan leaped, or maybe simply vanished, and then he was standing on a patch of empty bench directly in front of Dulsær. He snapped a punch at the griffonrider's face.

Startled, Dulsær failed to react. The blow would surely have smashed his nose except that Dai Shan stopped it an inch short of the target. The murk in the air cleared, and the sunshine streamed back.

"Is this how it works?" Yhelbruna asked. "We show leniency to one man, and the rest of you decide you're free to brawl in our presence?"

Dai Shan turned and bowed to her. "Noblest of ladies," he said, "one could quibble over the appropriateness of the word 'brawl' when no one has touched anyone else. But I'm not a quibbler. I take your point, and I apologize. Vanity got the better of me. There are occasions when I find it useful to be underestimated, but in the main, I prefer to be taken seriously."

"Demonstrate your prowess by destroying the undead," Yhelbruna said. "That goes for all of you. Understand, we aren't requiring you to do it all by yourselves. You can apply to the Iron Lord for additional warriors or any other help you need. But still, ultimately, the task is yours."

She flicked her wand through another intricate figure. Then she led the other hathrans and the glimmering telthors out of the amphitheater. Everyone else stood in silence as they passed.

When they were gone, Bez leered at Aoth. "Well, what do you say, Fezim? Partners?"

Aoth shifted his grip on his spear. His mail clinked. "It's something to consider," he replied.

"Come on," said the captain. "I don't understand everything you and these lovely ladies accomplished in Chessenta this past year. I don't know how anyone could make sense of all the stories. But it seems to have involved unraveling mysteries and secrets, and that's what's needed now. No one will ever stop these undead until we know how and why they're rising."

"True enough," said Aoth. "That's what my friends and I can cook for the feast. What do *you* have to contribute?"

"Surely that's plain," Bez replied. "You left your company in winter quarters; I brought mine. This is likely to come down to real battles, not just skirmishes in the woods, before it's over. When that happens, you want to stand with your fellow professionals, not alone, or with a pack of crazy barbarians."

Aoth smiled. "You may have a point," he said. "I've already seen how well 'crazy barbarians' stick to a plan. Equal shares, even though there's a whole shipload of you and only three of us?"

"Of course." Bez said, thrusting out his hand.

Aoth didn't grasp it. He simply nodded. "I'll let you know if I decide to take you up on it," he said.

The skyship captain's eyes narrowed. "Are you joking?" he asked.

"No," replied Aoth. "Because I remember Turmish, too, although not the way you claim to. And I'll partner up with you again if I think it's necessary, but not until."

Bez snorted. "Suit yourself, Thayan," he said. "Hold a grudge. You'll regret it when I fly off with *all* the griffons. That's assuming some wraith or ghoul hasn't torn you apart before then." He and his men turned and stalked away.

Aoth turned and cast about. "Vandar! Wait!" he called, as he started toward the berserker and his lodge brothers.

"So we are going to partner up with him?" Cera asked, scurrying after him.

"If he'll have us," Aoth replied. "And much as he dislikes me, I think he will. What happened in the grove shows we can help each other."

"Even though he and his folk are 'crazy barbarians?' " Cera asked.

"Better mad and wild than treacherous," he said.

* * * * *

Uramar scrutinized the hieroglyphs on the limestone wall. Some of his broken selves, the ones who were scholars of esoterica, were interested. They picked out symbols they recognized—the names of Abyssal powers and Infernal personages, mostly—and muttered as they speculated on the meanings of those they didn't.

He suspected they'd keep at it all day if he allowed them to, for it was the first Nar tomb complex he'd visited. He and his fellows had mostly begun by waking durthans and other wise Rashemi who'd perished in recent times. Those recruits had in turn helped them locate older ruins, barrows, and sunken, overgrown graves.

Of course, that wasn't the only way to find the resting places of the dead. A person could explore unmapped portions of the deathways and see where they led. That, as he understood it, was how his fraternity had discovered the new land in the first place. But it was a dangerous undertaking.

A frantic "Stop!" reminded him that his current methods weren't entirely safe, either. He pivoted, and his scarred, mottled hands shifted his greatsword into a middle guard.

A few paces ahead, four zombies had been breaking down a wall that brought the downward-sloping passage to what Nyevarra was sure was a premature end. The stroke of a pickaxe had knocked away plaster, but, by pure luck, left the wavy seven-armed sigil beneath unmarred.

Another blow certainly would chip it. Nyevarra did not content herself with snapping a command at the zombie to make sure that didn't happen. She grabbed its gray, slimy forearm and hauled it backward.

Short and solidly built like most Rashemi, Nyevarra had been a durthan. She still wore the robes and silver mask that had denoted her status, although the former were rotten and moldy; the latter, black with tarnish. Always somewhat unpredictable, Lod's magic had brought her back as a vampire. It was a condition she generally relished, although she'd been briefly distraught when her former familiar had appeared and instantly attacked her, and she had had to destroy the thing.

Uramar hadn't blamed her for feeling upset. The telthor's reaction to her rebirth really didn't seem fair, considering

that the wretched thing had been a bat. Or the spirit of a bat, or whatever.

As Uramar reached her side, he took another glance around, making sure none of the zombies showed any sign of taking another swing. For, while no member of the Eminence was truly mindless, the mute and sluggish things came close.

“What is that?” he asked, indicating the symbol with a slight inclination of his blade. He thought he already knew, but she was the expert on the mystical arts of the land.

“A trap,” she said, confirming his guess. “If we disturb it, something bad will happen. Given that the Nars’ great art was demonbinding, I imagine a fiend will spring forth and attack us.”

“So how do we proceed?” he asked.

“You and the zombies stand back,” she replied. “I’m going to try to call the spirit forth under my control. I’ll offer it freedom in exchange for a promise to leave us alone.”

“All right,” said Uramar. “Go ahead.”

The operation took a little while. First, Nyevarra removed a stone from one of the pockets of her robe and scratched an elaborate geometric figure, composed mainly of interlocking triangles, on the floor. Both the rock and the lines it made glowed a sickly blue. It was the first actual light he’d seen since descending into the vaults, for the undead didn’t need it to find their way.

She stood in the center of the design she’d created. Swaying, she crooned a chant that sent echoes whispering through the dark. Some of the carved symbols on the walls pulsed with phosphorescence. Despite its stupidity, a zombie shivered, and tears of sludge oozed down its slack, rotting face.

The trap symbol expanded. Suddenly, a creature resembling a huge insect burst from nothingness to thump down on the floor.

Its body was no bigger than a mastiff's, but its sets of spindly, many-jointed legs and three pairs of droning membranous wings nearly filled the corridor from wall to wall. Serrated mandibles gnashed and clicked above its cluster of bulging black eyes, and its several tails, each tipped with a curved stinger, coiled and lashed about.

Uramar had seen many things that the average mortal would consider horrible and hideous, including his own lopsided patchwork form reflected in a glass. And such things generally failed to disturb him, as they would not disturb most undead. But the demon, if that was what it was, seemed somehow overwhelmingly, even transcendently, vile. Everything about it shocked and sickened. The ugliness that made him strain just to keep his eyes on it. The buzzing that scraped at his nerves. The acidic stench that burned his nose, filled his mouth with a foul taste, and made his stomach churn.

Some of his souls simply couldn't bear the fiend's presence. They snapped and started screaming. But fortunately, most were resilient enough to allow him to ignore the clamor.

Two of the zombies, however, succumbed to the demon's influence. They fell down, thrashed, and pawed and swatted at themselves.

Uramar tensed when Nyevarra's knees buckled, and she too appeared on the verge of collapse. But she croaked a word of power and straightened up again.

"Are you all right?" he asked, raising his voice to make himself heard above the droning.

"Yes," the vampire said, "and you should be, too. I have the demon penned between the sigil on the wall and the one I drew. It's an ekolid, by the way. A lesser obyrith."

Lesser, said the demon, its psychic voice stabbing into Uramar's mind, *is a strange word for one of you paltry undead to apply to me.*

"We're the ones who have you caged," Uramar said.

For how much longer? the demon replied. *Your barrier and the witch are one and the same. I push, she has to push back. And so she exhausts her strength.*

"If that's true," Nyevarra said, "then I suppose it would be prudent to shove you back into your original prison while I still can."

The wasp-thing laughed. Its mirth was like a whip lashing and slicing the inside of Uramar's head. *But you can't, little leech. I don't know how long I was bound here. A long while, I think. But I can see that you're no Nar, and you don't possess their skills.*

"I don't see a point to your hostility," Uramar said. "The Nars enslaved you, so why would you want to fulfill their purpose? I was once in a similar situation, and I certainly had no desire to please my captors. Let Nyevarra set you free. All we ask in return is that you go in peace. Otherwise, we'll have to lock you away again or kill you."

It would be nice to thwart the Nar who bound me, the demon said. *But how would he ever even know about it? Whereas you little folk are cringing right in front of me. I can actually hurt and destroy you, and that too will set me free.*

"We're not cringing," Nyevarra began. Suddenly the blue glimmer in the lines on the floor blinked out, and the ekolid sprang at her.

Its forelegs slammed into her shoulders and chest, and its momentum plunged her to the floor beneath it. Its tails whirled around its body to drive their stingers into her flanks. Its mandibles spread to grip her head between them.

Uramar raised his greatsword, willed his cold flesh colder, and rushed in. "Kill it!" he called to the zombies. He wasn't sure that any of them would obey under the circumstances, or that they'd be of much use if they did, but it was worth a try.

Meanwhile, Nyevarra's body vanished in a puff of mist and swirled away from the demon's murderous embrace. The

ekolid immediately oriented on Uramar, and its several tails reared like serpents.

As Uramar lunged into striking distance, he couldn't see any sign that the deathly chill that surrounded him was bothering the fiend. He hadn't really expected it to, but it was another measure that was at least worth a try.

"Let's see you ignore this!" snarled one of his warrior selves, and he swung the greatsword down at the demon's head.

The obyrith responded with two simultaneous actions. One of its stingers stabbed into Uramar's flank just above the hip. A different tail whipped into position to parry the sword stroke near the top of its arc.

As the stinger ripped free, a burst of pain doubled Uramar over. But the greatsword cut a little nick in the demon's tail, and it faltered, too. A psychic shriek rasped through Uramar's head.

The ekolid shook off the paralysis of sudden pain with a rattling shudder of its entire body, transparent wings, lashing tails, and all. At the same time, Uramar found renewed strength of his own in the power that shivered through his sword hilt into his hands.

The ekolid scuttled forward. Though still not fully recovered, Uramar managed to snap his point into line. The demon jerked to a halt just before it would have rammed its own head onto the blade. Then it hopped backward.

A life-drinking sword, it said. How does a slave stitched together from scraps of offal acquire such a treasure?

"I'm not a slave," panted Uramar, straightening up. Not anymore, he wasn't. "You have no idea who we are, or the things we're going to do. It's a shame you won't live long enough to find out."

Perhaps you can tell me all about it when you're groveling to me in the Abyss, the demon said. That's assuming a travesty like you even has a soul to go there. Really, I think

it's just as likely that everything you are is about to disappear like a blown-out candle flame.

The pain of the puncture wound above Uramar's hip had faded to an ache, but flared into agony once more. A pale grub the size of his thumb came squirming out of the hole.

At that moment of shock, revulsion, and pain, the ekolid lunged. The two zombies who hadn't lost what passed for their minds lurched past Uramar and swung their pickaxes. The one on the right popped a couple of the demon's round black eyes into smears of jelly. The other tore a wing. The ekolid retaliated and all but ripped them apart with arcing, whipping stabs of its stingers.

At the same time, Nyevarra, in womanly form once more, shrieked three rhyming words. Lightning crackled from her outstretched hand to blaze across the demon's hindquarters. The blast made the ekolid falter for a scant instant, but had no other effect that Uramar could discern. It continued to scuttle toward him.

He dipped the greatsword low, as if he meant to shear the obyrith's forelegs out from underneath it. Its tails shifted to defend against such an attack and strike back at his torso. He retreated just out of reach of the stingers and let go of his weapon with his left hand. Suddenly he whipped out his arm, and threw a barrage of conjured hailstones from his fingertips.

Caught by surprise, the ekolid offered no defense. And while it might be impervious to pure cold, the hard bits of ice pulped and tore at the rest of its eyes almost as effectively as the zombies' pickaxes.

The demon recoiled, and, slashing, Uramar pursued. Nyevarra cast away her tarnished mask, revealing a face that a mortal might have found pretty except for its ashen pallor, needle fangs, and snarl of bestial fury. She leaped onto the demon's back among the buzzing wings and started biting.

Despite their combined attack, killing the ekolid wasn't easy. But finally the demon collapsed with much of its head, torso, and limbs either crisscrossed with gory wounds or chopped away entirely.

Its death throes were mere shudders, but from the corner of his eye, Uramar glimpsed something else crawling in the spreading pool of its dark, putrid blood. It was the larva, already bigger than when it had wriggled out of his side. He bellowed and stamped it to mush.

For a moment, slumping, he imagined that was the last thing he needed to do. Then he realized that Nyevarra was still clinging to the motionless ekolid and still licking and sucking at its wounds.

It was normal behavior for a vampire, but the results weren't. Her body swelled, and there was a squirming beneath her clothing, as though new appendages were sprouting. Her skull made crunching noises as it changed shape. Her two eyes divided into four, and the beginnings of mandibles curled from her temples.

Uramar dropped his sword, grabbed Nyevarra, and dragged her off the ekolid. She struggled, but her strength, though greater than human, was less than his own. Knowing of a no more sophisticated remedy, he slammed her into the wall repeatedly.

Rather to his surprise, it worked. Her shape ran and blurred, writhed and shifted in his grasp, until she was herself again, and she stopped fighting to break free.

He let go of her carefully and watched to see if her seeming return to normalcy was a trick. It didn't seem to be. She didn't use her restored mobility to attack.

"Thank you," she said. She rubbed her stained lips with the back of her hand. "The blood was foul, but wonderful, too. I couldn't stop drinking it."

"I'm glad it didn't do you any permanent harm," he replied.

“That’s twice you’ve pulled me back from oblivion, or as good as,” she said. She reached up, caressed his cheek, and traced the path of his jugular, her fingertip sliding over the ridges in his flesh. “Would you like to help me wash the bad taste from my mouth?”

Some of his broken souls moaned, “Yes!” But others urged caution, reminded him of his mission, or simply felt awkward and inept, and those were the voices that prevailed.

He stepped back from her and asked, “How did the ekolid break free?”

She smirked at his implicit refusal, and her fangs retracted into what appeared to be ordinary canine teeth. “The fiend explained it well enough,” she said. “It was strong, and I’m not a Nar.”

“Let’s press on, then, and find those who are,” he replied.

He retrieved his greatsword, and Nyevarra, her mask. The two zombies who’d gone mad had stopped thrashing, and when he told them to get up, they obeyed as if they didn’t even remember their panic.

Uramar ordered the creatures to finish smashing a way through the wall. When they did, the burial chamber stood revealed.

It was full of gold and gems, often used to fashion grotesque images of devils and demons in the forms of statuary, brooches, and sword hilts. One of Uramar’s selves, a simpleminded one, wished he and his companions had brought a lantern so he could see all the treasure gleam. Others felt a reflexive thrill of greed. But he barely noticed the stray flickers of thought. He was too intent on the trio of sarcophagi on their pentagonal dais.

Nyevarra grunted. “That was a lot of trouble to go to for only three,” she muttered.

Uramar smiled. “I think it will be all right,” he said. “Tombs are like houses. It’s powerful folk who have big, luxurious spaces all to themselves, or nearly so. And if these people

were powerful before they died, we can hope they'll come back the same way."

Prying with their pickaxes, the zombies shifted the heavy stone sarcophagus lids out of the grooves where they fit, then slid them to the side. One by one, the lids crashed to the floor. Whatever ultimately came of it, Uramar found he enjoyed this bit of desecration for its own sake. For how often, during the idleness and solitude of his long years in bondage, had he wanted to do something similar?

Inside the boxes were crumbling bones, dust, and the gem and metal portions of whatever garments the dead had worn. Uramar took a bottle of Lod's pigment from the pouch on his belt, and, careful not to crush the fragile things, daubed symbols of reanimation on what remained of the skulls.

It was time for the incantation. Nyevarra joined in, and gradually other voices started whispering along as well. For a change, they were not the phantom voices that commonly pestered Uramar. He didn't know whose voices they were. He wondered if even Lod did.

As he, Nyevarra, and the unseen chorus neared the end of the spell, he had a sense of twisting, or pressure and resistance, as though some abstract but fundamental aspect of the world was being forced into an unnatural shape. Somehow blacker even than the utter darkness of the crypt, shadows seethed and rippled inside the sarcophagi. On the final syllable, the shadows exploded outward, and for an instant, even he was blind.

When Uramar's sight returned, the Nars were already sitting up. The magic had brought them back as ghouls—gaunt, hunched, and hairless—with sunken eyes, mouths full of fangs, and claws on the ends of twisted fingers.

"What's happened?" asked one of the creatures. He'd come back with his nose entirely rotted off, which made his withered face look even more like a skull's than was the case with the other two.

“We’ve given the world back to you,” Nyevarra said, “and you back to the world.”

“Why?” Skull-face asked.

“Because we want your help,” Uramar said.

Skull-face sprang out of the sarcophagus, then faltered, seemingly startled by his own agility.

“We’re reborn better than we were before,” Nyevarra said.

Skull-face looked down at himself, then examined his rotting features by touch. “I would have thought I’d be repelled,” he murmured. “But I’m not. What I am is hungry.” He licked his lips with a black and pointed tongue.

A second ghoul sprang up. That one had been a woman. One breast dangled, and one was gone, along with the ear and cheek on the same side. “It’s strange,” she said. “I can’t remember anything after the axe came down. Was it all just nothing, then, without even a hell to suffer in?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Uramar said. “You’re here now.”

“Thanks to you,” said the third ghoul, standing up in a more gingerly fashion than the others. He’d been extensively tattooed, and he twitched repeatedly as the designs redrew themselves, a stroke at a time, in his shriveled hide. “Because you want our help. With what?”

“You were lords and conquerors once,” Uramar said. “We invite you to be such again, and help found an empire like none the twin worlds have ever seen.”

The female ghoul grinned. “Will this enterprise involve killing Raumvirans?” she asked.

Uramar sighed and replied. “Actually, that’s one of the many things we need to talk about.”

F O U R

Huldra was a reasonably imposing figure in her black-and-white hooded cloak and mask. The colors flowed and changed from one to the other as she marched along, like she was the moon itself come down to the sunlit center of the village of Yivel. And Aoth fancied that the rest of their little procession—Jhesrhi, Cera, Vandar, and himself—appeared as impressive as the hathran striding at the head of it.

Yes, all in all, it was no wonder that the inhabitants of the little huddle of longhouses and huts came scurrying to attend them. No one dared to keep them waiting, although, evidently hoping to avoid notice, some villagers made a point of standing behind their neighbors.

Huldra lifted her staff—a length of birch with an ivory crescent for a head—and thumped it down again. Dirty snow crunched beneath the ferrule. “Who speaks for this village?” she asked.

Since there was a gray-bearded man, muscular but running to fat, with a silver medallion in the shape of a bird of prey standing right in front of her, Aoth assumed the question was ceremonial. The bearded man’s stony-faced response probably was, too. “I, Borilak Murokina of the Eagle Lodge,” he replied.

“Do you know why I’ve come?” Huldra asked.

"No," Borilak said, and now his anxiety showed through. Traveling hathrans visited the village once a month. But to hear Huldra tell it, it had always been as a friendly counselor and healer, not as the cold, magisterial figure who stood before him with even more threatening-looking associates in tow.

"Then you don't know *anything* about the massacre in the north?" Huldra asked.

"No!" the aging berserker said.

"That's strange," Huldra said. "Very strange."

Aoth had to give the hathran credit. He'd drafted her not because he had any reason to think her a skilled dissembler, but simply because she was the hathran who ministered to the settlement. Yet she was being as subtly menacing as a Red Wizard inquisitor.

"Please, lady," Borilak said, "tell us." A murmur ran through the onlookers.

"I believe you all know," Huldra said, "that even with the durthans gone, the Erech Forest is a dark and tainted place. That's why the Wychlaran urged the Eagle Lodge and those allied with it not to settle the western shores of the lake. But you couldn't bear to let rich land go unclaimed, and we hathrans have protected you as best we can."

Get to the point, growled Jet, monitoring the proceedings through his master's eyes and ears. Aoth suppressed a smile.

"Unfortunately," Huldra continued, bands of black and white flowing across her garments, "it has now become plain that, despite our vigilance, a number of settlers have fallen prey to lycanthropy. And those so cursed have joined into a pack that slaughtered every living soul in Vinvel."

The villagers gasped and babbled.

Huldra waited until they had quieted down. "I promise the same thing won't happen here," she said. "We hathrans are going to do everything necessary to identify and kill the werewolves. You all know that my particular patron is

Selûne. At moonrise, she'll give me the power to reveal any lycanthropes living among you, and then my companions will strike them down. Killing shapeshifters is their particular trade."

Her gaze shifted back to Borilak. "Meanwhile, we'll rest in your house," she continued. "We've had a long hike through the snow."

The hathran led her companions toward a longhouse with carved jutting eagle heads and images of the birds in flight. Behind them, the villagers resumed their agitated talk, and a couple of women started sobbing.

Borilak had a good fire leaping and crackling in his field-stone hearth, and the air inside was considerably warmer than that outside. As Aoth leaned his spear against the wall and shrugged off his cloak, he said, "That was perfect, lady, thank you."

"I'm glad *you* think so," Huldra replied. Distress had supplanted the hauteur in her voice. "I never would have done it if not ordered by the Urlingwood itself."

Aoth knew just enough about Rashemen to understand the figure of speech. The Urlingwood was a sacred forest where only hathrans were allowed, and trespassers were put to death. Thus, "ordered by the Urlingwood" meant she had been commanded by one of the supreme matriarchs of her order. In her case, Yhelbruna.

"I understand how you feel," Cera began, slipping her gilded buckler off her arm.

"Do you?" Huldra snapped. "Many of the folk outside had family in Vinvel, and I just told them their kin are dead! How will they ever forgive me or trust me again?"

"They'll forgive you," Jhesrhi said, "when you explain the lie was necessary to flush out the werewolf that was living among them." Though she was the only one of them who likely hadn't felt the winter cold even slightly, she drifted toward the fireplace, and the yellow flames leaped higher. The light reflected on her staff.

"But you don't know that there is a werewolf!" Vandar said. "You're only guessing!"

Aoth sighed. He cast about and spotted a jug on a shelf. He pulled the cork and was pleased when the smell of beer suffused the air. "Think about it," he said. "High Lady Yhelbruna and the Iron Lord sent us all out to hunt the undead. So that's what Bez, Dulsær, and Dai Shan are doing. Even though the ghosts and such have turned out to be damned elusive so far."

He took a pull from the jug—the hoppy brew tasted good to him, but then, drink nearly always did—and offered it to Huldra. After a moment's hesitation, she accepted it and turned away to drink, so no one would see when she pulled her mask aside.

"What the others haven't considered," Aoth continued, "or at least I hope they haven't, is that not *all* the creatures we fought were undead. Some were werewolves. And since the durthans hailed from the Erech Forest, maybe the shapeshifters came from hereabouts, too. Maybe those who remained behind can tell us something about the witches."

"*If any* did remain," Huldra said, passing the jug to Cera. "And *if* they truly do live in one of the settlements instead of in the wild."

"It's reasonable to assume there are some left," Cera said. "Lycanthropy is a kind of sickness, after all. It spreads."

"And such a creature has a divided nature," Jhesrhi said. "When it's a wolf, it wants what a beast wants. But when it walks on two legs, it wants to live like a human."

"Well, maybe," Vandar said. "But it's still a shameful thing to lie to innocent people."

Aoth shook his head. "It's a miracle all you 'innocent' Rashemi have held back the legions as long as you have," he said.

I see them, said Jet, speaking mind to mind.

Them? Aoth replied.

Look through my eyes, the familiar said.

Aoth did so. As though peering down from high above, he spotted a man, a woman, and a half-grown girl who was almost certainly their daughter, trudging through the snow.

And they haven't spotted you? Aoth asked.

Are they acting like they've spotted me? the griffon replied. *They're too busy glancing back over their shoulders at the village to check the sky.*

Aoth redirected his attention to his actual surroundings. Vandar and Huldra seemed perplexed by his momentary abstraction, but Cera and Jhesrhi were merely curious. The sunlady and wizard had seen him in psychic communication with his familiar before.

"That was the answer to your objections," he said. "The plan worked. We have a whole little werewolf family fleeing the village."

"Have they already changed form?" Huldra asked. The hint of forlorn hope in her tone reminded Aoth that the locals were her flock and her friends.

"Not yet," he said, speaking as gently as he could. "But you just told the news that werewolves are roaming the countryside slaughtering people by the score, yet a mother, father, and a *child* are headed for the forest with sunset on its way. There really isn't any doubt."

The hathran took a breath and squared her shoulders. "I suppose not," she said. "What now?"

"You go calm the village down," Aoth replied. "Jet will keep the werewolves in sight, and my bond with him will lead the rest of us right to them."

* * * * *

Some people had the knack of creeping through a benighted forest, and some people didn't. Up ahead, Cera was doing her best, and her best was passable. But she suddenly tripped over a gnarled root, pitched forward, and

nearly sprawled on her face before she caught herself. She growled a vulgar word under her breath.

Jhesrhi realized she'd smiled. It couldn't really be the first time since Tchazzar's death, but it felt like it, and she decided that Aoth truly had done her a kindness by bringing her to Rashemen. Perhaps, after all the disappointments of Chessenta, it was exactly what she had needed.

At the head of the procession, Aoth raised his spear to signal a halt, then waved for everyone to gather close.

"Jet says they're just ahead," he whispered. "We'll circle around and come in from the west, so we're downwind of them. Remember we're here to spy, at least at first." He fixed his luminous blue eyes on Vandar. "No one is to attack unless I do, and I don't want to hear any nonsense about the spirits taking the matter out of your hands."

Vandar glowered back. "It happened as I said," he replied.

"If we do fight, we want prisoners," Aoth continued, "and I also don't want to hear how somebody's crazy bloodlust prevented that."

"I don't take orders from you, Thayan," said Vandar. "We agreed to be partners, not—"

Cera put her hand on the Rashemi's forearm. "Please," she said. "We decided on our strategy on the way out here. You didn't object to it then. Surely you'd agree that now is not the time to argue."

Vandar's mouth tightened, but apparently he couldn't quite find it in himself to spit poison at a pretty, soft-spoken priestess even if she wasn't quite a hathran. "Fine," he said, and then looked at Jhesrhi. "You were going to cast some enchantments?"

"Yes," she said, and began to work spells of concealment, drawing serpentine figures on the air with the head of her staff.

When she had finished, the companions prowled onward. Suddenly, the occasional howling they'd heard since entering the forest sounded much closer and louder than

before. Aoth hesitated for a heartbeat before continuing forward. Evidently Jet had assured him that the werewolves weren't reacting to the interlopers' approach.

Still, the war mage motioned for everyone to stay low, and he took cover behind the ridged trunk of a shadowtop tree. Jhesrhi crouched behind an alder and peered forward. Her eyes widened.

There were nine lycanthropes in the little clear space before her. They had already transformed, some to true wolf form and some to a bipedal shape midway between lupine and human, to howl. But they were changing back, their muzzles retracting into their heads, and their fur melting away. It seemed like an odd thing for them to do until she realized they likely found it easier to discuss certain matters with human tongues.

Naked like the rest of her companions, a female werewolf with a mournful, jowly face and a pudgy belly peered into the trees. For an instant, she seemed to look right at Jhesrhi but evidently didn't see her.

"Where *is* he?" the female shapeshifter said. "He must hear us. I heard the call all the way from Vinvel."

"And the rest of you didn't destroy Vinvel," said a fellow with bushy eyebrows. He hadn't quite changed all the way back to human. His arms and upper torso were still furry.

The jowly female sighed. "No," she said, with the air of someone responding to the same stupid remark or question for the dozenth time. "Of course not."

"But why would Huldra lie?" asked the man.

"I don't know!" the female replied. "We're careful. Even when the craving's strong, we only attack people who are off by themselves, and we never leave a body where anyone can find it. I don't understand why she's thinking about werewolves at all."

"It's the others," said a lycanthrope with an eagle tattooed on his chest—a member of Borilak's lodge, evidently. "They

got into trouble somehow, and now it's coming back on us. They never should have gone."

The sole child in the pack—a gawky girl who must be the one from the family whom Huldra had scared into running—gasped and shrank closer to the rather pretty woman beside her. "They're coming," whined the child, pointing in Jhesrhi's general direction. "I feel them looking at me."

As Jhesrhi peered around behind her, she heard the man with the bushy eyebrows say, "It's all right, Sweetheart. They're our friends." But he himself didn't sound entirely convinced, and as soon as Jhesrhi caught a glimpse of the four creatures stalking out of the trees, she understood why.

The newcomers in black mail and leather were as tall and as massively built as ogres. A single eye glared from each square, flat-nosed face; the pupil smoldered like a hot coal.

Jhesrhi and her comrades had taken cover to keep the werewolves from spotting them. Only her magic could shield them from creatures coming from the opposite direction. She held her breath, and her heart beat faster, until the cyclopes stalked on by.

The lycanthropes bowed awkwardly. Then a cyclops with an air of authority about him growled, "What's so urgent that it couldn't wait four more nights?"

"There's trouble," said the man with the bushy eyebrows. He'd moved to stand with his wife and daughter.

When he had finished pouring out the story, the cyclops leader studied him for a moment. The creature shifted his grip on the haft of his battle-axe and said, "You, the bitch, and your whelp don't have a brain among the three of you, do you?"

The father blinked. "I ... what do you mean?" he said.

"If this Huldra of yours really knew a prayer to reveal your true natures, would she warn you and give you a chance to flee?" the cyclops said. "It was a bluff to flush you out. To flush out the whole pack, perhaps. If so, it worked brilliantly, since your second idiot impulse was to howl for *everyone* to

come running. I wouldn't be surprised if someone's checking to see who's absent from each of your villages tonight."

"But ... that's not fair!" said a fellow who was thin and narrowshouldered, for a Rashemi, with pale puckered scars on his right thigh. Jhesrhi wondered if they were the marks of the attack that had cursed him.

The cyclops sneered, exposing stained, jagged fangs. "Really, Faurmar?" he said. "*That's* your opinion on the subject? How useful. Thank you."

"What will become of us?" the werewolf mother asked. "What can we do?"

"Well," the one-eyed giant said, "fortunately, it's not like you weren't about to move on anyway. The bravest among you already volunteered to help the durthans, and I always meant to enlist the rest of you whenever I found the patience to coax you. You'll come below with me tonight, and I'll find things for you to do."

The girl let out a little whimpering cry.

The cyclops glowered at the mother and father. "Shut her up before I decide she's too young and timid to be useful," he said. "Trust me, you don't want that."

The female werewolf with the sad, drooping face squared her shoulders and said, "Don't you threaten them. Don't you threaten any of us. It's your fault if we lose our kin and our homes. Because *you* cursed the first of us, didn't you?"

"No," the cyclops said, "of course not. There's a lot of old, wild magic festering in these woods, and you simply ran afoul of some of it. If you ingrates will recall, I'm the benefactor who found you and taught you how to survive. No, to thrive, for thrive you certainly did. In fact, you *gloried* in your condition. But now, just because things have gotten a little difficult—largely because of your own stupidity—you refer to it as an affliction? Be careful lest you offend the Black-Blooded Pard and all the princes of the night."

"All right," the jowly woman said. "If I spoke foolishly, I'm sorry. But still, we never said we wanted to be part of some

great scheme. If we did, we would have gone along with the dead witches like our packmates.”

“Maybe I’m the fool,” the cyclops said. “I assumed you’d all want lives of pleasure and ease. I thought you’d want to live openly and hunt humans whenever you felt like it. But if I was wrong, then drop to all fours and live out your days here in the wild as beasts and nothing more. Because, with your homes lost, I don’t see that you have a third choice.”

The werewolves exchanged looks. The sad-faced female said, “We’ll go with you, Choschax. But we’d better get the rewards you promise.”

Choschax leered. “I thought you might see reason,” he said. “And no one needs to look so hangdog about it, either. You’ll think back on this as one of the finest moments of your life. Now change, and we’ll be on our way.”

As the werewolves began to shapeshift, Jhesrhi reflected that she and her comrades had learned a little that was new, but nowhere near enough. Expecting that he would either want to shadow the enemy or attack and take prisoners, she looked to Aoth for a signal.

But he surprised her. With a patting motion, he indicated that she, Cera, and Vandar should hold their positions. Then he stood up and stepped out from behind the shadowtop. He recited a counterspell, slashing his hand through a zigzag figure, and the concealing enchantments she’d cast on him fell away with a gleam like water cascading down his body. And much as Jhesrhi trusted both Aoth’s judgment and his prowess, she winced to see him attempt such a daring ploy.

The cyclopes had their backs to him, so it was the werewolves who saw him first. The shaggy-browed father straightened back up into near-humanity to yell, “That’s one of them! He was with Huldra!” The other lycanthropes rushed to complete their transformations into wolves or wolf-people. They grunted and snarled in pain, and bones ground and cracked beneath their fur. The giants lurched around and came on guard.

“Easy!” said Aoth, keeping his spear in a vertical, nonthreatening position. “I only want to talk.”

“Hmm,” replied Choschax. He raised a hand, and his underlings held off attacking. Studying the intruder, he cocked his head one way and then the other, as if that would help his single eye see more clearly.

“Thayan?” he asked at last.

Aoth grinned. “What gave it away?” he replied.

“Where are your companions?” the cyclops asked.

“Back in the village performing the promised charade,” Aoth said. “I didn’t want you to jump to the conclusion that I was a threat and react accordingly, and plainly, the one of me is no match for the whole gang of you.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Choschax.

Aoth shrugged. “In that case, have the wolves sniff around,” he replied.

The cyclops sneered. “I believe I’ll do exactly that,” he said as he raised his hand and waved it in a go-forward gesture. With their transformations complete, sniffing audibly, the shapeshifters prowled out of the little clearing and into the trees.

Damn you, Aoth! Jhesrhi thought. Even up close, her magic might baffle a lupine’s eyes. But its nose? Its ears? Whispering, she rattled off words of power to reinforce her original spells, hoping they would be good enough.

Meanwhile, Aoth said, “Can we start talking while the wolves are making their check?”

“You can start by explaining yourself,” Choschax replied. “Did you follow them here to betray Huldra?”

“Huldra’s beyond betrayal,” Aoth replied. “She’s rotting in an unmarked grave several miles to the north.”

“Then the hathran who came to Yivel was an impostor,” said the cyclops.

“Right you are,” said Aoth. “*Masked* priestesses can be convenient.”

The cyclops hesitated as though unsure what to ask next. "Then ... what's your game?" he eventually asked.

"Oh, pretty much what it seemed," replied Aoth. "To bluff the werewolves into revealing themselves. But just for a talk, not to kill them."

Wandering back and forth, one of the two-legged werewolves came prowling straight at Cera. With the utmost care, fighting the urge to hurry, she eased herself out of the creature's path.

The lycanthrope stopped in the same spot she'd just vacated, a single step away from the place where she was crouching now. It pivoted on the spot, sniffing, then dropped to all fours to put its nose right next to the ground. After that, it raised its head and cast about some more.

Whispering, Jhesrhi repeated the charm of concealment. Cera's lips moved in silent prayer.

Jhesrhi wasn't the target of the sunlady's magic. But perhaps because she was so intent on the creature that was, she felt a bit of the effect even so. Time stretched. A single moment lasted twenty heartbeats.

The wolf-man apparently succumbed to the illusion completely. Seemingly convinced that it had searched for a sufficient time, it sprang to its clawed, gray-furred feet and stalked on.

Cera sighed a long sigh, and Jhesrhi felt some of the tension quiver out of her muscles. She looked around and saw that none of the other werewolves appeared on the verge of penetrating anybody's veil of invisibility. Remaining vigilant, she tried to pick up the thread of Aoth's and Choschax's conversation.

"... is it, exactly?" asked Aoth.

The cyclops grinned. "You seem like a clever fellow," he said. "What do *you* think it is?"

"I think some durthans survived the Witch War," Aoth replied. "Now they're reanimating their fallen sisters, and reaching out to their old allies among the 'dark fey' and

such—like you—for another run at the hathrans and the lodges.”

“And what if they are?” Choschax asked.

“Then I offer my personal compliments, and those of Thay, on the harm you folk have done to the Wychlaran and their followers,” Aoth replied. “But I also have to say that your actions have not truly weakened them, and if that’s all you can manage, a second Witch War will end just like the first. But it doesn’t have to.”

The cyclops snorted. “How so?” he asked.

“You folk want to get rid of the old order, and so does Thay,” said Aoth. “Working separately, we’ve failed to accomplish that goal. But by joining forces, we can succeed.”

“But then what happens?” asked the cyclops. “The durthans intend to rule the humans of this land, and, the way I hear it, so does Szass Tam.”

“I admit,” said Aoth, “there was a time when he did. But he’s come to recognize that no expansion is possible while Thay’s enemies surround us on every side. But if Rashemen becomes an ally, it changes the strategic picture considerably. Working together, we could conquer Thesk and Aglarond, too, and divvy them up between us.”

Choschax grunted. “And *you* have the authority to speak on Szass Tam’s behalf and negotiate this grand alliance?” the cyclops asked.

Aoth grinned. “Abyss, no,” he said. “I’m what I appear to be. An agent charged with the task of investigating accounts of strange occurrences in Rashemen. But I at least have the authority to *begin* such a negotiation. If I report that the durthans have returned and are willing to discuss an alliance, you’ll have a tharchion, zulkir, or someone similar sneaking north for a parley soon enough. So my question is this: Who can tell me whether such an envoy would be welcome? No offense, but I doubt it’s you.”

“No,” Choschax said, stepping closer, “it isn’t. But I can take you to them, and I—” He thrust his axe into Aoth’s face.

The cyclops struck with the blunt top surface of the blade, and it clanked into the rim of the war mage’s open-faced helmet. Otherwise, the blow likely would have dashed Aoth’s brains out instead of simply knocking him down to sprawl motionless in the snow.

Jhesrhi had believed the conversation was going well, and so Choschax’s sudden violence caught her by surprise, too. Fortunately, she’d experienced enough battles to shake off surprise quickly. She sprang up, stepped out into the open, discarded her veil of concealment with a word, and cloaked herself in fire to deter her foes from coming close to her.

Nor did they. But Choschax and two of the other cyclopes stared at her, and pain stabbed into her eyes and through her chest. She fell down with her heart pounding out a spastic, stuttering beat. It felt like it was tearing itself apart.

She struggled to recite a charm of protection, but it wasn’t easy when she couldn’t catch her breath. A cyclops warrior sneered as though to mock her desperate efforts.

Suddenly Jet plunged earthward in a rain of broken twigs. The branches overhead were thick enough that he’d no doubt scraped and battered himself in his precipitous descent, but maybe he felt desperate, too.

The griffon slammed down on top of the cyclops who’d sneered at Jhesrhi. As big and as strong as the giant was, Jet’s momentum smashed him to the ground, although it didn’t finish him. The cyclops strained to drag himself out from underneath his assailant and to shift his grip on his spear until he could use it to stab at close quarters. Meanwhile, Jet raked at him in an effort to tear away armor and reach the flesh beneath. His claws rasped metal.

Pure startled reflexes made the other cyclopes scramble away from the beast that had plummeted among them. But they soon poised their weapons to threaten him. Snarling

werewolves came slinking to surround and menace him as well.

With the cyclopes' gazes diverted elsewhere, Jhesrhi managed to suck in a breath and wheeze her incantation. Her heartbeat steadied, and the juddering pain subsided. Using her staff for support, she heaved herself to her feet. Swaying, she regarded the circle of foes who, by the looks of it, were only a moment away from swarming Jet and overwhelming him.

She couldn't hit them all without striking the familiar as well, so she settled for extending her blazing hand and snapping a word of command. Darts of red light leaped from her fingertips and stabbed into the broad backs of Choschax and another cyclops. The brutes cried out and staggered.

At that same moment, Vandar charged out of the darkness. With his face twisted in a snarl that made him look as feral as any of the wolf-men, he cut at a cyclops's neck. The giant jumped back and raised his shield just in time to keep the blade from opening his throat. Metal clanked on metal.

Cera chanted and swung her mace over her head. A circle of golden light flared into existence beneath her feet, and lines shot out from it through the snow, so that she appeared to be standing atop a shining symbol of the sun. The rays reached far enough to stab under some of the werewolves and Jet, too. The lycanthropes jerked, yelped, and snarled. The griffon struck at a shapeshifter and nipped off a forearm.

For a heartbeat or two, the enemy floundered in confusion, and Jhesrhi thought the fight might already be as good as won. But then Choschax bellowed, "Parothor, the sun priestess! Wolves, the griffon and the berserker! I'll kill the wizard!" And his underlings, cyclopes and lycanthropes alike, oriented on the targets he'd chosen for them.

Choschax's crimson gaze jabbed at Jhesrhi once again. To her relief, it wasn't as devastating that time. It didn't have the power of three other cyclopes' eyes reinforcing it, she'd

warded herself, and she knew better than to meet it squarely. But even so, it rocked her backward and made her head throb.

She was still off balance when Choschax produced a javelin that seemed to simply appear in his hand, and threw it. She jerked up her staff and gasped a word of command. A disk of red light blinked into existence between them. The javelin banged into the shield and fell to the ground.

Choschax charged. His lumbering strides ate up the distance, and his axe was upraised. Jhesrhi realized that her corona of flame hadn't dissuaded him from fighting at close quarters. Maybe he thought that with his long arms, leathery hide, and gauntlets, he could strike her down and come away with nothing worse than blistered hands.

She spoke to the wind, and it blasted into Choschax's face, slowing his progress to a stagger. In other circumstances, she might have asked the spirits of the air to whisk her beyond his reach, but the terrain was too clustered for flying. She didn't want to bang into a tree or entangle herself in branches.

The cyclops drove into striking distance. The malice in his eye was like a pounding hammer, and his arm shifted as he aimed his black axe at her head.

She asked the wind to stop shoving him, and it did. As he pitched forward off balance, she stepped forward and to the side. She was close enough for her fire to sear much of his body, but she saw no reason to leave it at that. The end of her staff burst into flame, and she jabbed it at his eye. He flinched. She missed her mark but charred his jaw, cheek, and ear.

Choschax screamed and reeled sideways. She hurled a fan-shaped burst of yellow fire at his feet. If it burned them, so much the better, but her real objective was to melt the snowdrift he'd stumbled into. As soon that happened, she rattled off a rhyme, pointed her staff, and hurled a blast of pure cold.

The meltwater froze into ice around Choschax's boots. He backed up another step, and his legs flew out from under him. He hit the ground with a crash of battered armor.

Jhesrhi grinned because she knew she had him. She spoke the first word of a spell intended to burn his flesh to ash, when suddenly a grip clamped shut on her ankle. It wrenched her leg out from under her, and she fell down, too.

A lycanthrope in true wolf guise had attacked her. Her halo of fire was burning away its fur and the skin beneath, but it was still snapping and gnawing in a frenzy. It left off gnawing at her war boot to lunge for her throat.

Jhesrhi jerked her staff across her body, and the brass rod caught the werewolf at the base of its neck. The shapeshifter strained to reach her with its slavering jaws, and she struggled to hold them away. The beast's paws pummeled her torso. Its raking nails tore her robes.

Her arms were hitched backward as the werewolf's strength overcame her own an inch at a time. The gnashing, foaming jaws and the glaring eyes behind them lurched closer. The creature's burns were ghastly, but it didn't even seem to feel them, or anything but the need to make its kill.

Jhesrhi struggled to simultaneously hold the werewolf back and recite an incantation with the precise cadence required. On the final word, a portion of her mantle of fire streamed into her attacker's gaping jaws. The lycanthrope screamed once and collapsed, burned from the inside out. Some of its ashy substance crumbled instantly, and more dropped away from the central mass as, in death, it reverted to human shape.

Enough of the charred form remained intact to show that Jhesrhi had just killed the daughter, the child werewolf. With a gasp of revulsion, she rolled the flaking corpse off her chest.

Choschax loomed over her, his glare pinning her in place like a butterfly in some sage's display case. He raised his axe.

Snarling, Jhesrhi broke free of her paralysis but knew she only had time for the simplest of spells. She jerked her staff into line and channeled pure force, pure will, through the end of it.

The power shot out as a ball of solid light. It smashed Choschax in the mouth and shattered into shards that vanished before they could tumble all the way to the ground. The cyclops fell and lay motionless.

Sometimes, Jhesrhi thought, the simplest magic did the trick. Although it helped if you'd already kicked the enemy around for a while.

As Aoth had taught her, she glanced about, making sure no new threat was about to strike at her. She clambered to her feet. Choschax was still breathing, but a final burst of flame would remedy that. She steadied her breathing and raised her staff.

"No!" Cera called. Jhesrhi turned to see the priestess hurrying toward her. She appeared disheveled but unharmed, which presumably meant she'd disposed of the cyclops that Choschax had ordered to kill her.

"Aoth wants a prisoner to question," Cera continued, "and this is the one who knows the most."

She was right, of course, but Choschax was also the one who'd struck Aoth down. That, far more than the cyclops's attempt to kill her, made Jhesrhi want to burn his life away. If the war mage wasn't all right, she would, too. To the Abyss with the mission, Yhelbruna's griffons, and Rashemen's problems.

For the moment, though, she and her comrades needed to finish the fight so Cera could tend to Aoth. "Watch him, then!" she told the sunlady, pivoting and looking to see where a spell would help the most.

For a heartbeat or two, she saw no reason to cast one at all. A griffon was slightly less deadly fighting on the ground than in the air, but even so, Jet had plainly had little trouble annihilating his share of the werewolves. He whirled amid a

litter of mangled, bloody bodies as a last foe dashed away on four feet. He bounded after it like a cat chasing a mouse.

With his teeth bared and his eyes glaring, Vandar pushed a wolf-man backward. The berserker's style was all offense: a relentless onslaught of slashes and cuts. He scarcely even maintained a guard, or seemed aware that his opponent had the ability to hurt him.

No sellsword in Aoth's company would have fought so recklessly, if only because the drillmasters would have trained it out of him. But it was working. The bloody gashes on the werewolf's torso showed that Vandar was hurting it faster than it could heal. Whenever it lashed out with its claws or fangs, the berserker somehow contrived either to meet the attack with a stop cut or to twist aside.

Suddenly a four-legged werewolf lunged out of the darkness toward Vandar's back. Jhesrhi leveled her staff and shouted a word of command. The resulting darts of scarlet light pierced the creature just as it started to leap, turning what could have been a deadly spring into the flopping tumble of a lifeless body.

Without seeming to even realize there'd been anything behind him, Vandar kept pressing his foe until his sword cut halfway through the werewolf's neck. The creature's legs buckled, and it dropped to its knees, clawing feebly at the blade. When the berserker yanked his weapon out of the wound, the beast toppled onto its face, and the fight was over.

Cera instantly abandoned the fallen Choschax to rush to Aoth and kneel down beside him. Jhesrhi guessed that meant it was her turn to stand guard over the cyclops. She positioned herself accordingly, but found it difficult to pay attention to anything but what the sunlady was doing.

Maybe her concern showed in the way she was standing. As Cera tugged off Aoth's dented helmet, Jet looked over and rasped, "He's not dead. I'd know if he was."

"I know," Jhesrhi said. But that didn't mean Aoth wasn't badly hurt or even dying.

Cera closed her eyes for a moment, and then her shoulders slumped in manifest relief. "He's all right," she said. "Just knocked senseless. I'll bring him around." She murmured a prayer, and her fingers glowed with golden luminescence. She gently touched them to Aoth's forehead, where a livid stripe of bruise already showed.

Aoth stirred, and his lambent blue eyes in their mask of tattooing fluttered open. "Need to puke," he groaned. Cera helped him sit up, and he turned his head and vomited into the snow.

"Better?" she asked.

"Some," he replied as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "My head still hurts. What happened to me?"

"Choschax hit you," Cera said.

"You'd think I'd remember that," Aoth said.

"No, it's normal," she answered. "Stay still." She murmured a second prayer and caressed his forehead again.

He smiled. "That's much better," he said. "Thanks." He looked around, retrieved his spear, and stood up. Cera quickly rose as well, and stood ready to catch him if he lost his balance. But he didn't.

When it was clear that he was steady on his feet, Cera looked around at the rest of her comrades. "Was anyone else hurt?" she asked. "In particular, was anybody bitten? If so, the Keeper's light can cleanse you, but we need to deal with it right now."

Apparently, everyone else was essentially all right. Jet disdained to mention the bumps and scratches he'd sustained while plunging through the branches.

"So what's our situation?" asked Aoth.

"Your trick failed," said Jet. "And the rest of us had to clean up the mess. As usual."

Aoth smiled a crooked smile. "And don't think I don't appreciate it," he said. "But the question is, *why* did the

trick fail? What sort of rebel or marauder spurns a potential ally out of hand when he's got a powerful enemy to fight?"

"All Rashemi hate Thayans," Vandar said. Looking drained and shaky with his fury subsided, he tugged a stopper from a water bottle.

Aoth shook his head. "If it was a werewolf that had attacked me, or even an undead durthan, that might explain it," he said. "But do the fey care about the grudges that divide one group of humans from another?"

"It could be that the cyclops recognized you," Cera said. "Because you have a reputation even this far north, or because the enemy has spies in Immilmar."

"Maybe," said Aoth, shrugging. Bits of snow that had caught in the links of his mail fell out.

"We don't have to speculate," Jhesrhi said. "Choschax is alive. Wake him up, and he can tell us."

"Good idea," said Aoth.

Everyone gathered around the cyclops. Aoth took a look at the hulking creature, satisfying himself that he was still unconscious, then used the point of his spear to pry the axe out of his hand and flip it beyond his reach. Next he slipped Choschax's curved dagger from its sheath and poised the spear an inch above his eye.

"Now you can heal him enough to rouse him," he said to Cera. "He doesn't need to feel well and strong. In fact, I'd rather he didn't."

"Amaunator will do as he sees fit," Cera replied with a hint of reproof. But when she stooped and worked the same magic on the cyclops that she had worked on Aoth, it was in a brusquer and more perfunctory fashion. The burns on the side of Choschax's face scarred over like he'd sustained them months before, and she backed away from him.

The fey's eye opened. He gasped and froze.

"Don't do anything stupid," said Aoth. "I'm squeamish about sticking a spear in a captive's eye. But not so squeamish that I won't do it."

“Useless curs,” Choschax growled.

“Don’t be too hard on them,” Aoth replied. “Jhes there is an able wizard, and anyway, they’ve already paid with their lives for not being able to sniff us out. Your guards, too, I’m afraid. There’s nobody left to help you if things get nasty.”

“What is it you want?” the cyclops asked.

“Information,” said Aoth. “Why did you respond to an offer of help by trying to take me prisoner?”

Choschax hesitated. “I do want to take you to speak to those above me,” he said. “But no one is allowed to see the way to our stronghold.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to offer me a blindfold?” Aoth asked. “Try again.”

“The wolves,” Choschax said. “You stole their human lives away from them. They needed revenge.”

“The wolves weren’t in charge,” Aoth replied. “You were. Even that one female gave in to what you wanted in the end. Tell the truth, or lose the eye.”

“I can’t tell you!” the cyclops said. “I gave my oath.”

Aoth set the spearhead shining with blue phosphorescence. “I promise you, no healing power will grow it back,” he said. “Not with my magic poisoning the wound. So, how do the blind and the crippled fare among your kind? Will the other cyclopes care for you lovingly? I doubt it. But since your loyalty is absolute—”

“Don’t!” Choschax said.

“Then tell,” replied Aoth.

The one-eyed giant swallowed. “I can only say what I know,” he said. “I’m not one of the lords who first struck bargains with the durthans, nor one who conferred with them when they returned. I’m just the leader of a war band. My mistress gives me orders without explaining the reasons why.”

“What orders?” asked Aoth.

“To keep our endeavors a secret from all living humans, especially those loyal to the hathrans and the Iron Lord, of

course,” Choschax said. “But *a/so* especially from Thayans.”

Aoth frowned. “You’re sure she said that specific thing?” he asked. “Even though the odds of running into a Thayan this far north of the border were remote?”

“Yes,” the cyclops said.

“Why? What exactly was she worried about?”

“I just told you, I don’t know.”

“How did the undead witches and the werewolves travel south from the Erech Forest without being spotted?”

“I don’t know.”

“How is it that you ‘dark fey’ and durthans expect to win this time around?”

“I don’t know.”

Aoth made a spitting sound. “You’d better know *something* more than what you’ve said already,” he said. “Otherwise, enjoy the sight of my face, because it’s the last—”

“It’s not durthans!” Choschax said.

“What?”

“I mean, it is, but they’re just one part of something bigger. It’s not live durthans bringing back the dead ones, because there aren’t any. At the end of the last war, the hathrans really did wipe them out.”

“Then who’s doing it?”

“I don’t know. But they’re the instigators of all this. The planners. And they must be the ones who are leery of Thay.”

Aoth frowned. “This ‘mistress’ of yours. Does she know more than you?” he asked.

“I ... suppose she must,” replied the cyclops.

“Then we’ll need you to show us where she lives.”

FIVE

Dai Shan looked at the Iron Lord and saw a creature scarcely better than a wild orc squatting in a cave. The dimmest apprentice in a Shou merchant household had more subtlety and sophistication than such a puppet ruler ensconced in a cold, stark little chamber adjacent to his equally graceless throne room.

Precisely because he himself possessed the qualities that Mangan Uruk conspicuously lacked, Dai Shan wasn't worried that his sense of superiority showed in his face, or that his deep bow conveyed any sense of irony. Nonetheless, the Rashemi glowered at him.

"You wanted a private meeting," Mangan said. "Tell me why. Have you learned something about the undead?"

"Alas, no," Dai Shan replied. "My people made an honest effort, but ... Highness, have you ever found yourself in the disconcerting situation of having to admit that a fool was right?"

"Not that I recall," Mangan said, gesturing for Dai Shan to sit down on the other side of the table.

Dai Shan pulled back a chair. "Thank you, noble prince," he said. "In this case, Folcoerr Dulsær is the fool in question—a doltish, arrogant representative of a doltish, arrogant people. Still, buffoon though he is, he's right about one thing. Theskian traders have no hope of unraveling a mystery involving the undead, necromancy, and the like."

Mangan grunted. "I saw how it got dark when you used your magic," he said. "I thought maybe you knew at least a little necromancy."

Dai Shan felt a twinge of surprise. Perhaps the Iron Lord was a bit less dim than he seemed.

"I'm afraid not," the merchant said. "And, if I may return to my point: the fact of the matter is that *no* group of outlanders—be they Shou, Aglarondan, Halruaan, or Thayan—is likely to solve the current problem for you. We simply know too little about Rashemen. We don't comprehend its history and traditions."

"Yhelbruna says differently," Mangan said.

"Highness, I mean no disrespect to the hathrans when I suggest that prophecy provides uncertain guidance to practical men," the Shou replied. "In my experience, it's better to act on the basis of common sense, and then trust that afterward, no matter how things work out, the seer will provide a tortured interpretation of the original prediction to demonstrate that it all came true after all."

For a moment, Mangan's lips quirked into a smile. It was the revelation Dai Shan had been watching for: a sign that at least once in a while and to some degree, the Iron Lord chafed at taking orders from the Wychlaran.

"I hear you," Mangan said. "But to a 'practical' man like me, your remarks so far seem to boil down to one thing: You give up. But you didn't ask for a private palaver just to tell me that."

"Your Highness is as astute as he is valiant," replied the Shou. "I'm ready to give up on ridding Rashemen of the undead. But I haven't given up on acquiring the griffons. The talks we had when I first arrived in Immilmar give me hope that you still see some advantage to parting with them in a straightforward business transaction."

Mangan scratched at his short black beard with its sprinkling of white. Dai Shan wouldn't have been astonished to discover that the Rashemi had fleas.

"You know I was always of two minds about that," Mangan said. "I believe the beasts truly are a gift from the spirits, and they unquestionably have the potential to become a formidable weapon. But Rashemen's forces have never included aerial cavalry—by the spiral horn, we barely even have horsemen—and a sensible warrior sees the practical difficulties of building such a company from scratch even if the witches don't. I also know Rashemen is a poor realm because we don't have much to sell that folk from other lands are willing to buy at a decent price. I thought, perhaps we finally do have something, and who's to say that's not what the Three mean for us to do with it?"

Dai Shan smiled. "Certainly not I," he said.

Mangan didn't return the smile. "No. *Not* you," he replied. "Yhelbruna. She proclaimed this quest of hers, and there's the end of any common-sense notions I had."

"Yet you're the Iron Lord," the Shou said. "Beloved champion of your people. I know you don't mean to suggest that you have nothing to say in the matter."

Mangan opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated.

Dai Shan pressed onward. "So it seems to me, wise prince," he continued, that if you ordered the release of the griffons into my custody, released they would surely be. Afterward, if you deemed it necessary, you could say you misunderstood the hathrans' plans for them, or that the Three spoke to *you* and commanded you to act as you did. Surely they've granted a revelation to a male at *some* point in Rashemi history.

"At any rate, the crux of the matter is this: With the griffons gone, the Aglarondans and the various sellswords will have no reason to stay in Rashemen and try to help you. And when they leave, the Wychlaran will understand that they don't dare pick a quarrel with the only warlord left to deal with the undead. That's what you've wanted to do from the start, if I'm not mistaken, and I have every confidence you ultimately will. By the time you have destroyed them,

the griffons will only be a fading memory, whereas Mangan Uruk will be more of a hero than ever. The hathrans will surely see there's absolutely nothing to gain by bickering with you, then."

"You spin a happy story," Mangan said. "But hathrans are actually minding the griffons, hathrans who undoubtedly do understand Yhelbruna's actual intent."

"*One* priestess tends the animals," Dai Shan replied. "One at a time. I took the liberty of checking. Surely two practical men can contrive a way to draw her away from her post. Then a wizard in my company, a beast charmer of some renown, will contrive to replace the enchantment Yhelbruna used to control the griffons with one of his own. After which, Rashemen will see us no more."

Mangan sat, scowled, and pondered for several heartbeats. "No," he said, finally.

Dai Shan sighed. "You're quite certain that's your final word?" he asked.

"Yes," Mangan said with a smile. "Sorry to disappoint you. I think you were pretty sure you'd hooked your fish, and for a moment ... But an Iron Lord takes direction from the Urlingwood even when he wonders if the wise women are really so wise after all. I do it not only because I swore an oath to do it but also because that's the way it's always been. And I don't care how it looks to some outsider."

"Highness, I understand completely," replied the Shou. "A wise man honors the ways of his forefathers." Except when they were cretinous savages who lived in fear of his foremothers, Dai Shan thought.

"Well, then," Mangan said. "Are we done? Shall I tell the cooks to prepare a farewell feast, and order my people to help yours get your iceboats ready to sail?"

"Actually, no," Dai Shan answered. "With your permission, we Theskians will stay awhile longer and keep trying to solve the undead problem."

"Even though you just told me you can't?"

"I was seeking a shorter, surer path to the griffons. But if no such path exists, well, perhaps the task the hathrans set us isn't so hopeless after all. The only way to find out is to give it our best."

"Then go do that."

"Yes, august prince." Dai Shan rose and bowed.

"Oh, and Saer?" Mangan said.

"Yes?"

"I'll be sending some warriors to keep that lone hathran company. Just to make sure you understand that the short path really doesn't exist."

After leaving the Iron Lord's presence, Dai Shan decided to walk the battlements for a time. It would be cold under the black and starry sky, but quieter than the chambers the castle chamberlain had set aside for his company's use, with his underlings and servants babbling, snoring, or wandering about. The solitude would help him think.

Though he couldn't have seen the griffons at such a distance even by day, he felt moved to linger on the north wall and gaze in the general direction of the hills where the hathrans were keeping them. By Shar's empty heart, what a treasure! The beasts could make the House of Shan the wealthiest merchant enterprise in Telflamm, and inspire Dai Shan's father to name him heir. In which case, his siblings had better commence their groveling quickly.

But in spite of alternating threats and promises of reward, his mages and priests had thus far accomplished little, and none of his other followers could reasonably be expected to penetrate the mysteries of the undead. It therefore seemed unlikely that the Shou could win the prize by themselves in the manner Yhelbruna had prescribed. It was time to find allies, break the rules, or both.

His first effort in that direction had just failed. Where, he wondered, pulling his overcoat tighter against the frigid, whistling wind, should he cast his line next?

It was easy to eliminate Folcoerr Dulsær. The Aglarondan was an honorable idiot just like the Iron Lord, even though in the Iron Lord's case, his haughty testiness might cause an observer less insightful than Dai Shan to miss the integrity underneath.

Aoth Fezim was at least intelligent, but possibly too much so. Dai Shan preferred allies who were sharp enough to function without constant direction, but not so sharp that they might be a jump ahead of him when the partnership outlived its usefulness. Besides, the Thayan seemed to believe in keeping his word, fulfilling his contracts, and all that tiresome sort of thing, even if there were one or two episodes in his recent history that suggested otherwise.

Vandar Cherlinka? He was an honorable idiot already allied with Fezim, although Dai Shan wasn't sure why. They didn't appear fond of one another. Perhaps they realized that each had resources the other lacked, and maybe they'd found a measure of grudging mutual respect fighting side by side in the sacred grove.

That left Mario Bez. Reasonably clever and devoid of scruples, he was currently flying around the countryside on his skyship hunting for ghosts and such. But he returned to Immilmar periodically. Dai Shan would offer him a partnership the next time he did.

So, that was one decision made. But Dai Shan still had another to ponder, and it was the more problematic of the two. He could think of several reasons why a cautious man would shun the course of action he was contemplating. But he hadn't risen to prominence in the House of Shan through caution—it had taken boldness and cunning. For, the Dark Goddess knew, his father would never favor a son simply for the sake of affection, even if the old snake were genuinely capable of feeling the emotion.

Dai Shan abruptly realized that he'd made his second choice. Somehow, picturing his father, withered, palsied,

and propped up on a mound of pillows, but as crafty, ruthless, and grasping as ever, had made it for him.

He glanced around to make sure he was unobserved. The Iron Lord no doubt had sentries who were supposed to walk the battlements, but at the moment, none was in evidence. He whispered, "Wake."

The moonlight gave him the bare hint of a shadow. In the darkness, many men might have failed to observe it even after it had leaped upright. But Dai Shan had no difficulty making out the inky rippling—a kind of negative shimmer—when it moved, or gave an attentive tilt of its head. He could even feel its stare and eagerness to please him. It was only by doing the latter that it could fill, even briefly, the aching hollowness inside it.

"Go forth," he said, "and find the undead creatures troubling this land. Bring them to me when you do."

The shadow bowed. It turned, leaped between two merlons, plunged to the ground outside the castle, and dashed away. Portions of its body stretched and contracted in the fluid manner of its insubstantial kind. In a moment or two, it had vanished into the night, and even its master couldn't make it out anymore.

Dai Shan knew he might never hear anything more of the familiar. It was undead of a sort, too, but that didn't mean it could sniff out durthan revenants, or that they'd trust it or care about its controller's offer if it did. Still, like reaching out to Bez, the tactic was worth a try.

It was impossible to guess who, if anyone, would ultimately end up helping Dai Shan claim the griffons. But, by the Dark Moon, claim them he somehow would. And if Rashemen came to harm as a result ... Well, the Iron Lord was right about one thing: his poor, barbaric land had never been much of a trading partner anyway.

* * * * *

Aoth kept his eyes moving. He was watching for threats slinking through the trees and keeping an eye on Choschax. Even with the cyclops's hands bound behind him and his feet hobbled with the silver-dusted rope originally intended to restrain werewolves, he might still try to escape or give warning of their approach.

Aoth took stock of the state of his command, making sure they were game for what he was about to require of them. Much as he trusted them—well, all of them except Vandar—he would have understood if they were nervous. They'd already fought one fight, and although they'd all emerged from it essentially unscathed, such struggles took a toll. On top of that, everyone was aware that the spellcasters among them had already expended a fair amount of their mystical strength. In other circumstances, Aoth would have put off a raid until they had rested and recovered. But if he delayed that long, Choschax's mistress would wonder why the cyclopes who'd gone out to meet the wolf pack hadn't returned.

Fortunately, no one looked shaky. Not even Cera, who arguably still wasn't a true warrior even if, since falling in with Aoth, she'd fought foes more terrible than most soldiers would ever have to face. Or Jhesrhi, who'd once spent a grim and desperate time trapped in the spirit world and likely wasn't eager to go back. He felt a surge of pride and affection for them both.

Vandar looks just as steady, said Jet, speaking mind to mind. The griffon was soaring above the treetops watching for trouble from that angle.

Aoth snorted. *He's too stupid to know what we're getting into.*

He's Rashemi. He knows more about the fey than we do. You just don't like the way he fights.

You're right. It's sloppy and undisciplined.

It's not so different from the way you and I fight when cornered.

But we try hard not to get cornered. We keep our heads, and that allows us to do the cornering. That's why we've survived as long as—

Choschax stumbled around to face his captors. Aoth turned his eyes slightly to the side, so he wasn't meeting the cyclops's burning gaze dead on.

"It's just ahead," Choschax said. "You'll see it."

"Go back the way we came," said Aoth. "We'll find you and untie you when we come back out. And remember, my griffon is watching you. If you try to get rid of your bonds, warn your friends, or do anything else we wouldn't like, he'll dive down and rip you apart."

The prisoner scowled. "I hear you."

"Then go."

As Aoth and his comrades skulked forward, and Choschax hobbled in the opposite direction, Jet said, *If we killed him, no one would need to keep track of him, and then I could go into the hole with you.*

That's not the only reason I'm leaving you on watch, or even the main reason, replied Aoth. *You're stealthy on the wing, not underground, and stealth is what's required now. Besides, if we run into trouble, I'll give you a shout, and you can go for help.*

You mean, back to Chessenta? That's where the rest of the Brotherhood is, and nobody in Rashemen cares what happens to a Thayan.

Go to Vandar's lodge. I imagine they'll listen to a griffon that tells them their chieftain is in trouble.

And fortunately, they're only a few days' travel away.

Then you come up with a better plan. Just do it quietly. I need to focus on what I'm doing so we won't need rescuing in the first place.

A gnarled thorn tree with twisted forking branches like clawed hands stood some little distance from its nearest neighbor. Aoth didn't recognize the species, but he did observe that it looked dead. The slimy pockets of rot in its

trunk made it stand out in a season when every deciduous tree had shed its leaves.

What he couldn't discern, even with fire-kissed eyes, was that the thorn tree was a sentinel, animate and aware of its surroundings. But he spoke the words that Choschax had taught him anyway.

The tree shuddered, its branches rattling. Cera took a reflexive step backward, and Vandar hefted his javelin. Jhesrhi drew fire from the head of her staff, and Aoth aimed his spear.

But the thorn tree didn't try to harm them. With its roots writhing and coiling like tentacles and pulling themselves out of the earth, it reached out and lifted a section of ground, like a trapdoor on its hinges. Illuminated by a pale glow from below, rude sandstone steps—high and deep, sized for a cyclops—descended into the earth.

"I'll go first," said Aoth. "I'll be able to see no matter what. Jhes, you're second, and Cera, third. Vandar, you're rearguard."

The berserker glowered but—for a welcome change—didn't argue.

The thorn-tree guardian lowered the plug back into the hole once Vandar was inside. Descending, Aoth and his comrades soon came to the source of the glow: a sort of rippling curtain of light.

To Aoth's annoyance, seeing it made him hesitate. Perhaps it was because, despite an eventful first century of life, he'd only visited another plane once before—Szass Tam's lifeless little artificial world—and he hadn't much enjoyed the trip. He spat, readied his spear, and strode on through.

Everything changed.

Aoth was still climbing downstairs, but his surroundings weren't earth anymore. They were black stone: unfinished, but glossy as though polished. Veins of gold and rubies, or something like them, glowed in the rock, providing additional illumination. The intricacy of the patterns and the richness

of the colors were fascinating. Aoth knew he had to remain alert, but couldn't resist drinking in the particularly gorgeous detail for just a heartbeat or two. And then that one over there—

Something bumped into his back and pitched him forward. He staggered down the steps and struggled to keep from falling. The effort snapped him out of his daze.

He turned and looked up at his companions. As they stepped through the curtain, each faltered and caught his or her breath as Aoth no doubt had, transfixed by the preternatural beauty before them.

It was a beauty they shared. Cera and Jhesrhi had always been beautiful in Aoth's eyes, but although he couldn't say how any one feature had changed, each now seemed as flawless and as radiant as a goddess. Even Vandar appeared to have the perfect musculature and keen, dauntless air of a hero in some lying bard's witless story.

"Choschax wasn't lying," Aoth said, as much to rouse his companions as anything. "His people do live in the Feywild, not in the Shadowfell."

The Shadowfell was the world of darkness, death, and decay that Jhesrhi and Gaedynn had once visited. The Feywild was its bright counterpart: a realm of light and vitality. Aoth felt invigorated just breathing the air.

"It's wonderful," Cera breathed.

"Don't let the wonders put you to sleep," said Aoth.

"Don't you," she replied. "You can see them better than we can."

"Nobody will let himself slip into a trance," Vandar said. "Now, can we keep moving? We don't want to get caught on these steps."

"You're right," Aoth said, "we don't." As he led his companions onward, making sure not to look at anything for too long lest its beauty draw him in, he noticed an unpleasant absence in his head. Apparently, shifting to a

different plane of existence blocked his psychic connection to Jet.

The intruders reached the little antechamber at the foot of the stairs without incident. A cavern opened out before them. There, magic, the toil of artisans, or a combination of both had sculpted much of the gleaming black stone with its luminous multicolored veins into arches, balconies, windows, battlements, and turrets. They stood as ornate and as imposing as the façade of a zulkir's palace. The splendor made Aoth want to stand and gawk. He gave his head a shake to clear it. There might well be sentries watching the entrance to the vault, and he and his comrades needed to focus on that.

"Ready?" he whispered.

"Yes," Jhesrhi said. She murmured charms of concealment, and her magic stung across his skin like icy needles.

"My turn," Cera said. Her lips moved in silent prayer.

To Aoth, it seemed paradoxical to ask the god of the sun to help you hide. But the sun wasn't just the world's great source of warmth and light. Its motion also defined the stately progression of time, and Amaunator gave some of his clerics the capacity to tamper with an observer's subjective perception of time. Cera wanted to compress the time it would take to scurry across the space ahead to the briefest instant, so that even if an observer had the ability to pierce Jhesrhi's veils, the intruders would appear and disappear so quickly that their presence wouldn't register.

"That should do it," the priestess said.

Aoth took a breath. "Let's go," he said and ran out into the open space.

He made it in three strides, and then a jolt of pain staggered him.

From his vantage point in the antechamber at the foot of the stairs, Aoth hadn't been able to see the big, stylized, staring eyes carved high on the walls of the vault beyond. No doubt that was as those who'd fashioned the magical

mantrap intended it to be. The pupil of each hieroglyph glowed red like the pupil of a cyclops's eye, and their gazes pressed down on him like a prodigious weight.

As he and his comrades lurched and stumbled, trying to keep their feet, he spotted the battlements directly above the arch they'd just passed through. A pair of cyclopes stood there with crossbows in hand, ideally positioned to pick off intruders immobilized by the magic of the eye glyphs.

Which was to say, ideally positioned to pick off Aoth and his companions. Waves of heat were rippling over his skin, which likely meant that countermagic was burning his enchantment of invisibility away.

He had to move. He slapped at two of the tattoos under his mail. The first released a tingling surge of strength that washed away some of the pain. The second was a protective charm that, he hoped, would deflect some of the power of the eyes. Still feeling like he was carrying an enormous weight, he staggered one step, and then another.

So did Cera. "Keeper," she gasped, "Keeper, Keeper, Keeper."

Jhesrhi spoke in one of the tongues of Sky Home. A cold, howling wind sprang up at the intruders' backs to shove them along.

The wind helped, but Vandar still collapsed to his knees and couldn't rise unaided. Aoth lurched around, grabbed him by the forearm, and heaved him to his feet.

It seemed to take forever to cross the courtyardlike space and duck into one of the smallest doorways. As soon as they did, the pain and feeling of relentless pressure disappeared. Aoth would have liked nothing better than to lean against the wall and catch his breath, but he forced himself to lead the others far enough down the passage that he was sure the cyclopes sentries couldn't see them. At that point, intricately carved stonework gave way to something that, except for the level floor, might almost have been a natural

tunnel, although the darkly gleaming rock remained profoundly lovely.

“Well,” Cera panted, her round face shiny with sweat. “That was interesting. But let’s hope there are no other little details that Choschax neglected to mention.”

“That was well done back there,” Jhesrhi said stiffly. “My enchantments burned away fast. It was yours that kept us hidden.”

“The eyes were designed to tear away veils of illusion,” Cera replied. “We were lucky the Keeper’s gift wasn’t precisely that.”

Vandar turned to Aoth. “Thank you for helping me up,” the berserker said, albeit grudgingly.

“I had to,” said Aoth. “If the guards had caught you, they would have started looking for the rest of us.”

Vandar scowled.

Aoth sighed. “By the Black Flame, lodge master, that was a joke,” he said. “Well, mostly. Obviously, we’re all in this together, and we all look after one another as needed.” He looked around. “Is everyone ready to move?”

The others indicated they were.

“We’re in a small tunnel with no decoration,” said Aoth. “My guess is that this is the area where the slaves or servants live and labor on their masters’ behalf. If Tymora smiles, we won’t run into any cyclopes, and the thralls won’t care about us. Just try to look like you belong.”

They prowled onward through what soon proved to be a maze of passages. In many respects, including the seductive beauty that kept snagging Aoth’s attention, it was strange; but in others, it reminded him of the service areas of any palace. Goblins snored on pallets in a dormitory-like space. Tools—some shaped so peculiarly that their intended use was a mystery—leaned in corners or hung from pegs and hooks on the walls. And in a cluttered, filthy kitchen intended to feed the slaves, not their owners, the gutted carcasses of enormous rats dangled by their feet from the

ceiling, and an iron cauldron steamed and bubbled on a bed of coals in a hearth.

The orange glow of the coals was captivating. Despite Aoth's resolve to remain alert, they held his gaze for a moment, until someone said, "Psst!"

Startled, he cast about. A hanging eviscerated rat with a bristling black pelt looked back at him with beady scarlet eyes. The combination of colors reminded him momentarily of Jet, although the griffon would surely have taken offense at the comparison.

"You're not dead," Vandar said.

"Do I look dead?" asked the rat. Aoth heard the edge of pain in his high, cheeping voice.

Cera said, "Actually, yes."

The creature sniggered. "Fair enough, sunlady, fair enough," he said. "But you could make me better, you and your healing hands."

"Maybe she could," Vandar said. "But you have the look of either a corrupt fey or an awakened beast allied with them. So I don't know why she would."

"To keep me from tattling that there are intruders in the palace," the creature replied. "Guards do wander by from time to time."

The berserker drew his dagger. "I know another way to keep you quiet," he said.

Despite his mangled condition, the rat managed to raise his front paws in a placatory gesture. "Easy, human! I was only joking," he said. "The reason you should set me free is because you're either spies, thieves, or assassins, and I've been spying here for a while myself. Whatever you're after, I can help you."

Aoth glanced around, checking to see if anyone was approaching. No one was, as far as he could tell. "Who are you, and who were you spying for?" he asked.

"My name is Zyl," replied the rat. "The name of the prince I serve wouldn't mean anything to you."

“But he’s dark fey, isn’t he?” Vandar asked. “Which means a creature in his service is the last person we should trust.”

“If you know anything about fey,” said Zyl, “dark or otherwise, you know we keep a bargain or a promise. And I swear by Lurue’s horn that if you free me and heal me, I’ll help you perform whatever foolhardy task you came to accomplish.”

Cera looked to Aoth. “We shouldn’t leave any creature in such a plight,” she said.

Vandar hefted his knife. “With respect, lady, I don’t intend to,” the beserker replied.

Zyl kept his eyes fixed on Aoth. “I truly can help,” he said. “And you’ve fought alongside fouler things than me in your time.”

Aoth smiled a crooked smile. “I don’t know how you know that, but it’s true,” he said. “Vandar, you’ve already got a knife out, so you can cut that wire around his feet. Cut him, too, if he tries to bite or run.”

Scowling, the Rashemi got Zyl down and laid him on a table amid a scatter of bread crumbs and scraps of yellow fungus. Cera murmured a prayer that set her hand aglow and gently pressed her fingers to the rodent’s ghastly wound.

Afterward, the raw, vacant space didn’t look any different. But Zyl did. He rose to his feet with renewed energy and said, “Thanks. Now it’s your turn, fire spirit. If you cool down the coals and the pot, I’ll thank you, too.”

Jhesrhi aimed her staff and threw a flare of frost at the cauldron and the hearth. Steam puffed into being as cold met hot.

Zyl jumped off the table, ran across the floor, sprang on the rim of the cauldron, and dropped inside. Over the course of the next few moments, pieces of rat viscera flew out of the vessel to land with a splat on the gleaming black floor. Aoth watched with slightly squeamish fascination as Zyl jumped back out after the organs, and, rearing onto his hind legs

and using his forepaws like hands, stuffed them back inside his body cavity. When he had finished, he pulled his flaps of skin and muscle closed and sealed them with the stroke of a claw. His abdomen bulged and heaved as the organs inside presumably rearranged and reattached themselves.

Zyl looked up and caught everyone staring. "I mostly heal pretty well all by myself," he chattered. "I just needed a push to get me started. Now, what's this errand you're on?"

Aoth told him.

Still peering up from the floor, Zyl cocked his head. He seemed nonplussed, as if he hadn't just been hanging helpless with his guts stewing on the other side of the kitchen. "That ... might not be so easy," he said.

"Well," said Aoth, "you've been spying. If you already know the information we're after, you can simply share and save us all some trouble."

"Unfortunately, I don't," replied the rat. "So ... Let me think ..."

"We've stayed in this one spot too long already," Vandar said.

"Patience, berserker," Zyl said, "I don't tell you how to slice your own flesh and foam at the mouth." Zyl looked back at Aoth. "Follow me," he said as he dropped to all fours and headed for an exit.

As they left the kitchen, Jhesrhi waved her hand in the direction of the hearth. Fire leaped up from the coals to set the cauldron boiling again and turn any leftover frost or water to vapor.

"If you're such an able spy," Vandar asked, "how did they catch you?"

"They didn't," said Zyl. "They caught a common rat. If they'd caught me, knowing it was me, I would have been hanging in a torture chamber, not the slaves' larder."

"Still," Cera said, shifting her grip on her gilded mace, "how did they get you?"

“To you, healer, I’ll confess they found me passed out drunk,” Zyl said. “When their masters aren’t looking, the goblins distill a liquor from table scraps, toadstools, and such. It’s foul, but I’ve been in Lady Grontaix’s home a long time. I’d go mad if I didn’t take a little pleasure when I had the chance. Now, hush, everyone. We’re making too much noise.”

Aoth thought the rat was right, and so, though he was full of questions, he allowed Zyl to lead them stalking onward in silence. At one point, a cyclops warrior appeared up ahead, but he evidently couldn’t see far enough in the gloom to spot the intruders. Aoth whispered, “Freeze,” his companions obeyed, and the hulking creature disappeared down a branching passage without ever realizing anything was amiss.

By degrees, the tunnels and the chambers they connected became more and more rough and irregular, and showed fewer and fewer signs of use, until the intruders were essentially traversing natural cavern. Zyl stopped in front of an opening as broad as Aoth’s hand that ran up from the floor to as high as the human’s knee.

“This,” said the rat, “is the tunnel I use to spy on the mistress of the house. Don’t worry, it’s big enough for humans on the other side of the hole.”

“Maybe,” said Vandar. “But can we break through the wall without making enough noise to bring every cyclops in the place down on top of us?”

“The fire spirit can,” Zyl replied.

Frowning, Jhesrhi said, “That’s true. Just give me room to work.”

Everyone else stood back while she positioned herself in front of the appropriate section of wall. She recited words of power in one of the tongues of the earth elementals, her high clear voice managing the hard consonants and rasping inhuman sounds without a fumble. For a moment, the folds of her patched, stained cloak and the strands of her golden

hair stirred as though a jealous wind was tugging at them in a plea for her attention.

The wall split from the small hole upward, grinding and crunching. Beyond it, an entirely natural tunnel twisted away. The floor humped up and down. In some places, the walls pinched inward, and in others, the ceiling dipped low enough so that a human would have to stoop to pass beneath it.

“Does it get anymore cramped than this?” Aoth asked.

“Some,” Zyl replied. “But I promise, you can all squirm through if you try.”

It turned out he was right, although at one point, the way narrowed into such a tight bottleneck that Aoth wondered if anyone but Jhesrhi would be able to wriggle through without leaving armor behind. Then it occurred to him to conjure a coating of grease into being on the surface of the stone, to make it easier to worm one’s way through the tight spot, and when Aoth, with his wide shoulders and barrel chest, succeeded, he knew that his companions could, too.

To his relief, the way widened out after that. Not long after, they reached a spot where a small fissure in the wall about four feet up made a natural peephole. A trace of light leaked through from the other side.

Zyl leaped up onto a bulge in the stone just beneath the crack. He rose onto his hind legs, peered through, and then motioned for his companions to do the same. Crouching, Aoth obliged him.

The vault on the other side was a sort of garden of stone, where sculpted trees and flowers, in many cases adorned with leaves, fruit, and blossoms of gold, silver, and some green metal or alloy, rose from the floor. Water splashed in fountains and ran through channels spanned by arching bridges. To human eyes, the bridges seemed anomalously broad and massive. But of course they needed to be to accommodate creatures as big as cyclopes, let alone the mistress to whom they owed their fealty.

Lady Grontaix was lounging in a sort of gazebo, oversized like the bridges, in the center of the vault. Twice as large as any of the five male cyclopes attending her, she had a hairless hide the ugly mottled purple of a bruise, a hunchback, and one eye bigger than the other. The larger one was all amber except for a slit pupil, while the smaller one had a brown iris, a white sclera, and a round pupil.

Aoth had never encountered such a creature before. Choschax had told him she was a fomorian, and as he looked at her, he experienced a sort of division of perception. He considered her one of the most grotesque creatures he'd ever seen. But the Feywild invested even her deformity with its own kind of glamour.

Still, if Grontaix herself didn't seem *entirely* grotesque, Aoth couldn't say the same for her current pastime. Though the cyclops males looked like children in comparison to their enormous lady, their attitude was that of the eager suitors Aoth had watched paying court to some celebrated beauty in places where extravagant gallantry was in vogue. One sat sketching the fomorian in charcoal, another was feeding her mushroom caps, and a third was declaiming what Aoth, though he didn't know the language, assumed to be cyclops love poetry. The poet punctuated the particularly passionate phrases by striking notes from the dulcimer in his lap.

Aoth motioned for his companions to take a look. When it was her turn, Cera whispered, "You must be joking."

"Ridiculous as it looks," Aoth replied just as softly, "don't let it distract you from the fact that those creatures are dangerous. Now, Lady Luck has favored us. Grontaix is right there. We don't have to roam through her apartments hunting her. We're going to make the most of our good fortune by hitting hard and fast." He told his comrades what he wanted them to do.

"What about me?" asked Zyl.

Aoth had no idea what, if anything, the rat could do to help, and he didn't feel like investing the time to find out.

“Just make yourself useful however you can,” he said.

They all took deep breaths and shifted their grips on their weapons. Cera murmured a prayer that made Aoth—and everyone else, presumably—feel refreshed and clearheaded. With a thought, Jhesrhi cloaked herself in fire, then she spoke to the wall. She wanted the stone to open fast, not quietly, and it split with a deafening crack.

Startled, Grontaix and her consorts jerked around. Aoth scrambled through the breach, leveled his spear, snapped a word of command, and so cast one of the spells stored inside the weapon. A cloud of greenish vapor burst into existence to envelop the gazebo. Aoth could smell its putrid stench even at a distance, and inside the billowing mist, someone started retching.

The poet cyclops reeled out of the cloud with his dulcimer still in hand. His gaze stabbed at Aoth, who felt a twinge of headache, but with Cera’s blessing fortifying him, he felt nothing worse. He hurled darts of azure light from the head of his spear, and they plunged into the cyclops’s torso.

The brute staggered but didn’t go down. He hurled the oversized zither, and it flew at Aoth like a stone from a catapult.

Caught by surprise, Aoth just barely managed to jump aside. The dulcimer slammed into the wall behind him with a crash of wood and a jangle of strings.

The cyclops drew his blade and advanced. Aoth poised his spear to defend, but Vandar screeched like a griffon and raced past him to engage the giant. Aoth wondered if the berserker was actually following the plan or just charging headlong at the first foe to present himself. Either way, it freed Aoth up to look for Lady Grontaix.

As he cast about, he glimpsed Cera chanting and swinging her mace over her head. A shaft of searing light blazed from the head of the weapon and struck the cyclops who’d fed his lady the mushroom caps squarely in the face. He cried out and clapped his hand over his eye.

Meanwhile, Jhesrhi chanted at Aoth's back. Other than the breach she'd just created, there were two ways into the vault, and her next task was to seal them before other cyclopes came rushing in. Masses of stone banged, crunched, and shifted as her power pulled them shut like curtains. Shaken loose, chunks of rock fell from the ceiling.

Grontaix blundered out of Aoth's conjured fog. She had mushroom-and-red-wine vomit splattered down the front of her silken gown.

"You want me!" Aoth shouted, advancing a couple paces. "I made the mist!"

She responded by closing her small eye and glaring with the large one. Though he'd never encountered a fomorian before, Aoth had heard that, like their cyclops vassals, they possessed the power of the evil eye. He twisted his head so as to not meet her gaze directly.

It didn't matter. Chathi died again, burning in an instant when the rod in her hand exploded. Mirror plunged his insubstantial sword into Szass Tam's ravaged skeletal form, and they both blazed bright, but when the light faded, the ghost was gone, and the lich lord remained. Szass Tam turned, tore Bareris's head from his shoulders and then advanced on Aoth.

Nor was he the only one. His staff glimmering with magic, Malark glided in on the sellsword's flank. Alasklerbanbastos and Tchazzar loomed above Aoth's other foes, each dragon whipping his head forward and opening his jaws wide as he spewed his breath weapon.

Aoth cried out and staggered, dropping his guard. Grontaix raced forward, her huge hands extended to seize him.

Aoth waited until she was nearly on top of him. Then, pleased that his trick had worked, he dodged, charged his spear with power, and thrust at her knee as she pounded by.

He could do it because, while it was by no means pleasant to watch people he'd cared about die all over again, or to

see a selection of old enemies attacking him all at once, his truesight made the illusory nature of the phantasms immediately and absolutely apparent. Thus they couldn't disorient or even hurt him as they might have another. But pretending they had was a good way to lure Grontaix in close.

Aoth's spear point tore flesh and scraped bone. The fomorian screamed and staggered, but didn't fall. Instead, she stumbled around to face him again. He rattled off an incantation that put him at the hub of a spinning wheel of blades. Floating at chest level, the defense threatened any foe who ventured into striking distance. But in all likelihood, it would only slash the giant's extremities, not her vital organs.

Too late he saw that Grontaix didn't mean to rush him again. Not yet, anyway. Instead, she invoked magic of her own. She thrust out her fist at him like she was miming a punch, and green and yellow light swirled from the cat's-eye ring on her middle finger to make a kaleidoscopic pattern in the air.

Aoth was no longer looking at illusions that he could recognize for what they were and ignore thereafter. The light was only light, but it was supremely beautiful; its power to fascinate augmented by both the atmosphere of the Feywild and his own preternaturally acute vision. He strained to look away, break free, but there was a treacherous part of him that didn't really want to.

Recognizing that she had him under her spell, Grontaix leered, gripped a little sculpted pear tree, and, with astonishing strength, twisted it and ripped it up from the floor. Aoth saw that the makeshift club would make it easier for her to strike at him without coming in contact with his spinning blades, that the hammering length of black stone would shatter his bones and pulp his flesh, and still, he couldn't quite bring himself to move. With blood running from her wounded knee, his foe limped forward.

Suddenly Zyl darted past Aoth and up the fomorian's bloody leg. He paused for an instant to bite and scratch at the gash the spear had opened, then scurried onward. He vanished under the hem of her gown.

Grontaix roared and pounded with her fist at the moving lump under the fabric. Somehow, she missed, and only managed to thump herself. Zyl scrambled from her front to her back, where she'd have trouble reaching, and where, Aoth assumed, he clung gnawing at her flesh.

Still roaring, the fomorian heaved the stone tree over her head and thrust it repeatedly downward like a huge, unwieldy back scratcher. Shaken loose, silver pears fell clanking and rolled clattering across the floor.

Meanwhile, a cyclops at the periphery of Aoth's vision swung his sword at the flying mace of golden light that was assailing him in turn. By keeping the giant occupied, the conjured weapon freed up Cera to try to help Aoth. With her voice shrill—but still as controlled as spellcasting required—she rattled off a prayer.

It set him free. Suddenly, though the floating, shifting pattern was still beautiful, its hold on him ended. For an instant, he felt a belated horror at having been so helpless, but he shook it off.

By that time, the scraping stone branches had ripped Grontaix's gown from her body. The garment hung from the tree like a tattered flag on a pole. She rammed her weapon downward yet again, and it finally brushed Zyl from his perch and dashed him to the floor. She lurched around, exposing the hump that, crisscrossed with welts, cuts, and bite marks, looked like someone had flogged her, and glared down at the rat. He thrashed like he was in the throes of a seizure. She swung the tree over her head.

Aoth cast a fan-shaped flare of flame from his spear, and it splashed across her crooked, bloody back. She howled and staggered.

“I’m still here, Ugly!” he bellowed. “Finish with me before you start killing rats!”

She turned back around like he wanted her to. The force of her glare was like a hammer slamming into his face. He staggered and cried out, and, as fast as her wounded leg would allow, she rushed him.

By the time Aoth had recovered his balance, the stone tree was whirling at him in a horizontal arc. He leaped back, and it missed his body but caught the end of his spear. The force of the blow tore the weapon from his grasp and stabbed pain up his arm. He suspected it was nearly broken or dislocated.

Aoth snatched out the short, heavy sword he carried as a backup. He wasn’t as adept with it, nor had he painstakingly infused it with as many enchantments as he had the longer weapon, but it would have to do.

He would have to get close to the fomorian and stay there, so the blade could reach her. She would have a more awkward time of it attacking him from the shorter distance. He scrambled toward her just as she followed up with a backhand swing.

Aoth strained to spring forward even faster and just made it inside the giant’s reach. Her arms were above him, and the branches of the stone tree scraped, banged, and snapped, sweeping across the patch of floor at his back. The wheel of blades sliced a deep gash across Grontaix’s unwounded leg before the magic blinked out of existence. With a final stride, Aoth closed the distance, charged his sword with destructive force, and slashed a second cut above the other.

The sword bit deep, but the giantess still wouldn’t fall down. Though the wound must have hurt her, she repeatedly tried to stamp on Aoth, and to stab the top of the stone tree down on his head. She alternated those tactics with an attempt to scramble far enough away so that his sword couldn’t reach her, while at the same time sweeping him away by swinging her makeshift weapon. He dodged, pursuing doggedly whenever she tried to open up the

distance, and cutting at her whenever she gave him a chance.

Meanwhile, something started pounding on the other side of one of the arches that Jhesrhi had sealed with her wizardry. So far, Aoth and his comrades had held their own, but it seemed unlikely that even the elementalists' mastery of earth and stone could keep the rest of the giants out for long.

Which meant they had to end the fight quickly. *Aoth* had to, for he'd taken the critical task upon himself. Everyone else was essentially just keeping the cyclopes from swarming on him.

Grontaix tried another retreat, and pursuing more slowly, trying to look fatigued—it shouldn't be difficult—he let her open up the distance. She screamed and whirled the stone tree—the silver pears all fallen away, many of the branches snapped off short—in another sweeping horizontal stroke.

Aoth didn't try to dodge. He'd let her open up the distance precisely so she could attempt another of those arcing blows—they took longer to travel to the target. With luck, they even afforded the time for a spell. He rattled off words of power as the stone tree spun at him, and he slashed in its direction with his sword.

A shaft of green light blazed from the blade and struck the onrushing makeshift weapon. The whole tree glowed emerald for an instant and then simply disappeared.

The sudden absence of its weight threw the fomorian off balance. Aoth charged and cut at her nearest leg like a mad logger frantic to fell a tree.

He slashed repeatedly, inflicting new wounds on a limb that, like its mate, was already a gory, tattered mess. Blood spurted. Grontaix roared, stumbled, and fell headlong. When she slammed down, it jolted the floor, and Aoth nearly lost his balance, too.

He sprinted toward her head, grabbed the edge of an ear, and pressed the point of his sword against a pulsing artery

in the side of her neck. "Don't move!" he gasped. "Tell the cyclopes to stand down! *Now*, or you're dead!"

She hesitated for a moment, then cried, "Everyone, stop!" It gave him a vague sort of satisfaction that she sounded as winded as he did.

When he felt confident that she really had stopped fighting, he risked a quick glance around. To his relief, all of his allies appeared to be all right. In fact, they'd killed two more cyclopes: one that Jhesrhi had apparently burned to death and another that looked like it had succumbed to a combination of sword cuts and bites from large fanged jaws. The bites didn't look like the results of any spell that Jhesrhi or Cera used, and Aoth could only assume that some magic Zyl commanded was responsible. The surviving retainers were lowering their weapons and backing away from their opponents.

Suddenly the stone plugging one of the arches flew apart with a flash of silvery light and an echoing boom, and more cyclops warriors scrambled through the breach. Fortunately, they faltered when they saw Aoth's blade at Grontaix's throat.

"Good," he told the giantess. "Now, everyone's going to stay calm, you're going to answer some questions, and then you're going to escort my friends and me safely out of here."

"That'll be a good trick," she gritted, "considering that I'm bleeding out."

He realized that might actually be true. "Cera, if you have any power left, keep her alive," he said.

"All right," the priestess replied. She stanchd the rhythmic arterial spurting with a prayer and a gleaming touch of her hand.

"There," said Aoth. "You see, this doesn't need to turn ugly. Well, uglier."

"Who are you people?" the fomorian growled.

"Agents of the Iron Lord and the Wychlaran," Aoth replied.

“Well, not all of us,” said Zyl. “It looks like my disguise has outlived its usefulness, so these oafs might as well know who outwitted and defeated them.” His body contours flowed as he started shapeshifting.

Though he didn’t consider himself a fanciful man, Aoth imagined his new ally might now stand revealed as a sinisterly handsome dark-elf wizard or a notably hideous devil. That, after all, was the sort of transformation that happened in stories. Thus, he felt a mixture of anticlimax and amusement at his own romanticism when the black rat flowed into the shape of a black hare.

But if he wasn’t impressed, Grontaix was. “You!” she snarled.

Zyl laughed as he said, “Yes. I’ve been hiding right here in your palace for months now.”

“And I imagine you have some things to say about it,” said Aoth to his captive. “But they’ll keep. Right now, you need to tell me about the undead durthans, and don’t bother denying you know what I’m talking about. I’ve already questioned your warrior Choschax.”

The fomorian spat. “I curse the night the durthans came back!” she said.

“The hathrans aren’t too happy about it, either,” said Aoth. “But why—apart from your present situation—do *you* say that?”

“When my folk first allied with the durthans, we were supposed to help them cast down the hathrans, and they were supposed to help us crush our foes in the Feywild—”

“Like me!” Zyl interjected.

“—and Shadow alike. But the so-called ‘Witch War’ was a disaster. The hathrans annihilated the durthans, and our enemies humbled us. There may be some among my people who are eager to try exactly the same thing again in precisely the same way, but I’m not one of them. That’s why I live apart: because I can’t abide the company of fools.”

"So why," Cera asked, "did you help the durthans recruit werewolves to their cause?"

The giantess snorted. "The curs are nothing," she said. "Just a convenience we in this stronghold created to keep true humans off my land."

"So by parting with something of little value," said Aoth, "you satisfied the durthans and bought yourself time to decide whether you really want to throw in with them again or not."

"Yes."

"Who's bringing the durthans back?"

"Other undead, supposedly from somewhere far away. I don't know where, exactly. I've only met with the durthans, not with the ones who called them from their graves."

"If they're from so far away," Vandar asked, shivering and ashenlipped now that his rage had passed, "what do they care about Rashemen?"

"I can't tell you why they chose to come to this land in particular," Grontaix said. "But I do know their intent is to establish some sort of hegemony of the dead. The durthans will rule here as they desire, but their dominion will be part of something greater."

"Like the tharchs that make up Thay," said Aoth.

"I suppose," replied the fomorian.

"And that explains why these invaders are so concerned about Szass Tam and his lieutenants finding out about them. Thay's already an empire of the undead and necromancy. I doubt it wants a rival, and it may well have the power to destroy this one before it really gets going."

"That would be my guess."

"And when the undead rule Rashemen, what do your people get out of it?"

The fomorian sneered. "Those who came to visit me gave essentially the same pledges as before," she said. "The undead will rule in the mortal world, and my folk will rule in the spirit realms."

"How do the durthans and the other undead travel around Rashemen without the hathrans' watchers spotting them?"

"I can't say, but it's a useful trick."

"What else do they have in their quivers? What's their grand strategy for winning a new war?"

"I don't know that, either."

"You must at least have some idea where they've based their command."

"Is it Citadel Tralkarn?" Vandar asked, referring to the ruin that had once been the durthans' greatest stronghold.

The fomorian snorted. "Do you think they're stupid enough to establish themselves in the first place so that you berserkers and such would come looking for them?" she said. "No, the invaders visited Citadel Tralkarn early on, before you had any idea that anything was amiss. They reanimated those they could, looted what remained to be looted, and moved on."

"Where to?" asked Aoth.

"I don't know that all their captains are there, or even the chief one. But they're gathering strength at the Fortress of the Half-Demon," Grontaix said with a smirk. "Enough to slaughter your little band, I'm sure."

"Isn't that a Nar ruin?" Cera asked. "Are the newcomers bringing back dead Nars, too?"

"Ask them when you meet them, assuming you're fool enough to go," the fomorian replied.

"We won't look foolish with my lodge behind us," Vandar said. "This is what my brothers and I have been waiting for. Now that we know where to find our enemies, we can kill them."

"Not a chance," Zyl said. "Or at least, not unless my people help."

"Will they?" asked Aoth.

"They might," said the hare. "A squabble between humans and their dead grannies is no great matter to us. But if these invaders are giving our enemies among the fey silly notions,

and if they're tampering with the fiends the Nars left locked in pentacles and the like, that could be a problem. We could certainly ask my prince to send warriors to look into the situation. One of you could tag along with me to help explain it."

While others, Aoth thought, fly back to the lodge house in Immilmar. Then the two forces will rendezvous near the haunted fortress.

"It sounds like you have it all figured out," Grontaix growled. "So why not go away and leave me in peace?"

"I told you," said Aoth. "We're going to keep you hostage until you and you alone have accompanied us back aboveground. Unfortunately, I need to keep a weapon at your throat, so you'll have to put up with me riding on your shoulder. That is, unless you'd rather crawl."

S I X

It wasn't much of a village, just a cluster of huts in the rugged hills between Lake Ashane and the Urlingwood. In such a backwater, there were relatively few people to kill, and even fewer who could put up a fight against the dead. By the time Dai Shan's shadow arrived, the massacre was nearly over, but not quite. It felt the survivors before it actually saw them, as points of warmth in the cold and dark. It sensed its peers, too, as something colder than cold and emptier than empty.

As the shadow came loping down the slope, one grinning corpse gripped a little boy's ankles, and another, his wrists. They pulled in opposite directions, and if they were hoping to rip him in two, they were disappointed. But he screamed as his arms and legs came out of their sockets.

A ghoul clawed a woman to rags, and then, when the victim stopped struggling, took an experimental bite out of her shoulder. It spat the bloody flesh out again, dumped the body on the ground, and, swinging itself along on its knuckles, scuttled toward the tiny graveyard.

A man drove a spear into a thing so decayed that the shadow couldn't tell if it had originally been male or female. Though it had no eyes left in the dark and mushy wreckage for a head, the creature looked down at the weapon, then grabbed its attacker by the neck.

The shadow needed to decide how best to approach the killers. It was still pondering in its murky way when a

hathran in a white tabard, cloak, and single-horned mask and a unicorn suddenly appeared among the carnage.

Together, they shed a silvery glow that burned and dazzled the dead like sunlight. While the creatures were still reeling from that, the unicorn whipped its head and tore the mushy thing in two with its horn. The hathran chanted a prayer that turned the left half of a ghoul's body to dust. After the part that was left fell down, it tried feebly and futilely to crawl.

Perhaps because the shadow hadn't hurt anyone, the priestess and the unicorn didn't appear to notice it. It realized it had an opportunity to win the trust and attention of its fellow undead. It circled around behind the unicorn and the hathran. Then it charged.

When it got close enough, the pale light seared it, too, but the pain was bearable. It pounced like a cat, landing on the unicorn's back, and plunging its freezing, insubstantial hands into the sacred animal's flesh. The unicorn jerked and screamed.

Raising her scimitar, the witch pivoted toward her ally. But before she could strike or cast a spell at the shadow, an imp the size of a hawk, with beating batlike wings, pointed ears, and a mouth full of needle fangs, appeared in the air directly behind her. It whipped its tail, and the stinger at the end of it, at the back of her head.

The sting didn't seem to penetrate her woolen cowl. But she whirled to defend herself from the hovering devil and left the unicorn to look after itself.

The shadow pummeled the sacred beast repeatedly, as fast as it could. But the animal simply vanished out from underneath its attacker.

The shadow spilled to the ground like water. The unicorn popped back into view on its flank and instantly leaped, its shining horn leveled.

The shadow threw itself to the side, and the thrust missed. The unicorn pivoted, reared, and battered at it with its front

hooves. One blow plunged through its arm, and it felt a shock of pain.

A burst of dark red, somehow filthy-looking flame splashed across the unicorn's side. The animal screamed and staggered, dropping back onto all fours. As it struggled to recover its balance, an undead stepped in and clubbed it in the head with a war hammer. Blood splashed and bone crunched. The unicorn collapsed and lay motionless. The haze of silvery glow surrounding it and the hathran dimmed.

The animal's slayer was a walking corpse with three fleshless skulls on his shoulders instead of one. Judging from his mail, his faded, rotting, but ornately embroidered surcoat, and his manifest power, he was almost certainly the captain of the raiding party.

With the unicorn slain, the undead leader rounded on the hathran, but needlessly so. The holy woman was collapsing under the stinging, biting onslaught of half a dozen imps. In another moment, the pale ambient glow blinked out of existence entirely, extinguished along with her life.

The leader looked around, and darkness seethed in the eye sockets of the middle skull. The entity's fallen minions stirred as an infusion of strength repaired the harm the unicorn and the witch had done to them.

The leader whistled and raised a hand that wore a bulky gauntlet resembling a falconer's glove. Snarling and gibbering, bloody-mouthed, the imps rose from the hathran's corpse and flew to their master. As each swooped close to the gauntlet, it disappeared.

The three-headed creature then turned to peer at the shadow. "You're not one of mine," said the middle skull. "But you can be. You can join us."

But the shadow knew that wasn't so, because its will wasn't its own. It was a bound thing, made for one specific purpose, and it was time to fulfill it.

The shadow took all its strength and turned that power to a final purpose. By so doing, it perished, and Dai Shan

appeared in its place.

Well, not really, the Shou thought as he offered the three-headed undead a deep and courtly bow. He was still a shadow, or perhaps at that point it was more apt to call himself a reflection. Either way, he too would cease to be when the magic that had created him ran its course. Until then, though, he could think and speak like the original, and the original would know what he accomplished thereby.

"I take it," said the leader, his tone less cordial than before, "that you fancied yourself the master of the shadow that just sacrificed itself so you could appear before me."

"Yes," said Dai Shan, taking care not to risk giving offense by reacting to the stinks of corruption and burnt unicorn fouling the cold night air. "I created and commanded it. I'm Dai Shan of the House of Shan in Telflamm, if those names mean anything to one so venerable as the august magus I see before me."

"It's a crime for any of the living to seek to control an undead," the leader said.

Dai Shan arched an eyebrow. "Even one that would never have existed in the first place had the living man not shaped it from a wisp of himself?" he asked. "I'm not sure that's incontrovertibly rational or incontestably fair. Still, I humbly apologize for inadvertently offending against your customs."

"It's not a 'custom.' It's a law," the creature replied.

"As you say," Dai Shan said. It really was cold here, and the Shou instructed himself not to shiver. Not only would it disgrace him, but it might lead the thing with three heads to imagine he was afraid, and that in turn might elicit aggression.

"But sadly, it's too late for the enforcement of any law to benefit the shadow," Dai Shan continued. "As you so astutely observed, it's already gone beyond recall, and the actual person who made and directed it is beyond your reach. Might it not be more productive, then, for you and his

proxy to discuss matters of mutual import in the time remaining before I, too, disappear?"

The undead leader grunted, or perhaps it was a single grudging beat of laughter. "What do you want, 'Dai Shan of the House of Shan in Telflamm?' " it said.

"The valiant captain's name, for a start, if you see fit to honor me with it," replied the Shou.

"Falconer will do. What else do you want?"

"Griffons."

The undead hesitated. "I don't know what you mean," it said.

"Then please, allow me to enlighten you." Dai Shan said. He told the undead about the captured beasts, Yhelbruna, and the competition she'd proclaimed.

When he had finished, Falconer said, "Then it sounds like you—or the phantom that was here before you—should have fought on the unicorn's side."

"Only if I thought that my agents and I could contribute significantly to the hathrans' victory," replied Dai Shan, "But what if I question whether such a victory will even materialize? What if I think that you risen Nars and durthans have a better chance of prevailing? Then it would be prudent to throw in with you. That is, of course, if you're willing to part with the griffons to compensate me for the assistance I would provide."

Falconer fingered the fleshless jaw of the middle skull while he said, "If I were this Yhelbruna, I might well send an agent—or his 'proxy'—to make such an offer in the hope that some gullible soul would take him into his confidence and divulge useful information. Especially if there was no true risk to the actual agent himself."

Inwardly, Dai Shan acknowledged Falconer's shrewdness. That was indeed one ploy to attempt in the game in which he was trying to be on everyone's—or at least the hathrans', the undead's, and Mario Bez's—side at once.

“Noble champion,” he said, “you’re wise to be cautious, and indeed, I expected nothing less. But I believe I know how to allay your concerns. Tell me nothing. Not yet. Instead, simply let me help you. I’ve explained there are four other groups who truly are seeking your downfall. Let me destroy one of them as a way of demonstrating my good faith.”

“I have a measure of authority, but I’m not the supreme commander of all my kind,” replied the undead. “I can’t say yes or no to such a venture.”

“Then I suggest we devise a means of communication that will allow such deliberations to proceed,” said the Shou.

* * * * *

Cera cried out as the sweet building pressure inside her exploded into release, and Aoth grunted as he finished right along with her. After a few moments, he rolled off her, and they lay for a time, their sweaty bodies pressed together, utterly relaxed and looking up at the rafters of Borilak Murokina’s longhouse.

“That was delicious,” she said after a while.

“Glad you liked it,” he replied with a chuckle.

“I wonder what it would have been like to do it in the Feywild.”

“We were a little busy, and maybe it’s just as well. If it was too good ...”

“Then making love in our world might not satisfy us anymore? I don’t believe that could ever happen.”

“No, neither do I, really.”

“But I guess this will have to hold us for a while.” She pouted. “Even though the only reason I came north was to be with you.”

He peered at her as he did when he wasn’t sure if she was teasing. She realized she wasn’t *entirely* sure, either.

“You know I don’t want to separate,” he said. “But I don’t think any of us should go anywhere by himself—”

"And obviously," she replied, "Vandar needs to be one of those who goes back to Immilmar to bring the Griffon Lodge north. But he and Jhesrhi could ride the wind east while you and I go with Zyl to see the fey."

Aoth sighed before saying, "That's the way I'd like to do it. But—"

"You don't think you should separate from Jhesrhi," Cera replied.

"Is it that obvious?"

"It is to me."

"Well, I hope it isn't to her. I don't want her to think I don't trust her. And that's not it. Not so far. But I am worried. She says she's glad she changed, and I understand how she might be. But is it true? At times, she fought so hard to overcome her problems. What's this but an excuse to surrender to them?"

"I understand your worries, and of course you have to take care of her. She's your foster daughter, or near enough, and I don't want you to think looking after her makes a problem between you and me. It's just ..."

"What?"

Cera wasn't sure herself what she truly wanted to say but continued on as best she could. "During that final battle in Luthcheq, we killed *dragons*. Perhaps, without quite realizing it, I came away thinking that if we could manage *that*, no lesser foe could harm us. I certainly didn't expect this journey to be especially dangerous. But we almost lost Jet in the sacred grove. I could have lost you when the fomorian held you spellbound."

"But we're all fine now," Aoth said.

"But it didn't *have* to turn out that way."

Aoth frowned. "Sweetheart, I don't know what you want me to say. That we're invincible? You're not a child, and you know better. Any soldier can die in any fight against any enemy. All it takes is one mistake or a bit of bad luck. But

you, Jhes, Jet, and I are good at what we do. The odds are with us most of the time, and when they're not, we cheat."

"I know, and I'm not turning into a coward—"

"I certainly know that."

"—It just strikes me, you'll always be a warrior and have battles to fight. That's just who you are. But does it have to be exactly like this? After what you accomplished in Chessenta, Shala Karanok would be happy to make a permanent place for you there. You could be a nobleman; Jhesrhi, Gaedynn, and Khouryn could be knights; and the Brotherhood could become a part of the regular army."

"And you wouldn't have to choose between being the head of your faith in Chessenta and staying with me."

"I love you, Aoth. Truly. But I can't roam the world with you if Amaunator tells me my place is in Luthcheq."

"And I love you. Truly. But I won't become the vassal of any lord. Not even a good one like Shala."

"Why not?"

"I suppose because when I was young, I served too many bad ones. Their ambitions laid waste to my homeland, and they used me with no regard at all for my welfare. And eventually, it made me decide that I was never going to think of anyone as my better or my master ever again. And I never have. Sellswords offer their services to kings and such, but we negotiate the terms, and the contracts are always temporary."

She shifted, getting more comfortable in the crook of his muscular arm. "I know you're independent," she said. "You don't even like the suggestion that a *god* is telling you what to do."

"You're right," he replied. "When Yhelbruna started raving about messages from the spirits and sending us all off on a quest, I was almost ready to chuck this whole enterprise." He smiled a crooked smile. "But only almost. I need those griffons."

“Then somehow we’ll win them,” she said with a sigh. “And probably, by then, it will be time to go home.”

“Where we don’t know what will happen when all you sunlords and sunladies gather. The others may not even try to elect you. I’ll bet there are priests who actually want the job politicking frantically in your absence.”

Cera decided not to say that there might be a part of her that actually wanted the job, too.

* * * * *

Folcoerr Dulsær looked at the griffons sleeping in the snowy field. The men had built fires at various points as their commander had ordered. Some of the griffonriders had grumbled that the hardy mounts could handle the cold, and Dulsær privately conceded that they almost certainly were right. But he’d always been solicitous of the steeds’ welfare. That, to his way of thinking, was the true mark of an honorable man: he took good care of the lesser creatures—such as animals and children—that fate placed in his keeping.

His eyes automatically sought out Copper, his own mount, slumbering like the rest. He realized that even though he was nearly as tired as his steed, he wished he could spend the morning flying, just the griffon and him. It might help him forget the frustration of crisscrossing the wretched, barbaric land for days on end without ever finding his quarry.

“Even sleeping,” said a soft baritone voice, “the beasts are magnificent.”

Startled, Dulsær jerked around to see Dai Shan standing in that straight, still, and somehow vaguely dainty way of his. The Shou’s breath steamed, but other than that, there was no indication that he felt the chill in the air, even though his long green overcoat didn’t look all that warm. The longhouses of Immilmar with their peaked sod roofs

stood a long bow shot behind him, brown accents in a world of winter white.

Dulsaer's mouth tightened. He'd never liked Dai Shan, and disliked him still further since the merchant had made a fool of him in front of the Wychlaran. Still, he supposed it behooved him to show the man a modicum of civility.

"Yes, they are," he said. "Did you hike out from town just to look at them?"

Dai Shan smiled as he said, "It was griffons that lured us all here, brave captain. Naturally, I'd like to become more familiar with them. And now that the Iron Lord has posted guards to keep us from approaching too close to the wild ones, I have nowhere else to study them. I must say, these look every bit as strong and as fierce as the ones we're squabbling over."

Dulsaer nodded. "Absolutely," he said.

"Which begs the question," said the Shou, "if Aglarond already has griffons of such quality, why are you so intent on acquiring the ones in Rashemi hands?"

"What the simbarchs want, their servant delivers."

"But I have absolute confidence that such a shrewd officer knows *why* they want them, and could enlighten me if he chose."

Dulsaer shrugged. "I suppose it's not a secret, just common sense. When it comes to a weapon like griffons, you can't have too much of it. You're also wise to keep your enemies from getting any. The first time Aglarond tried to take back the Wizard's Reach, that turncoat Fezim brought griffons against us, and that was part of the reason we lost. For that matter, Thay itself once had a Griffon Legion. Don't you think they'd rebuild it if given a chance?"

"It may be so."

"And Thay's the enemy of every other land in the East. But if you had the griffons, you'd sell them to Szass Tam, wouldn't you? You'd figure his gold spends the same as anybody else's."

"It grieves me, valiant sir, that you appear to regard my profession with disdain. I humbly concede, it's not heroic like your own, but still, it would be a cheerless, hardscrabble world without commerce."

"Maybe so, but tell me I'm wrong about the griffons and you."

"About me, personally, you are. I have some insight into the source of Szass Tam's powers, and the unfortunate things that would befall any realm that came under his sway. But I must admit, my elders in the House of Shan might not see that as clearly as I do, and I too have orders to obey. Happily, I enjoy a certain amount of latitude as to how I interpret them."

Dulsaer cocked his head. "What are you getting at? Say it straight out."

"As you wish. In front of the hathrans, carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, I expressed my intent to destroy the creatures troubling this realm. But later, I reluctantly came to the conclusion that you were right: My little band lacks the resources to accomplish any such thing. You, on the other hand, possess precisely the armed might necessary ... Except that, if rumor can be trusted, you haven't had any luck locating the enemy."

"So you're suggesting a partnership?"

"Of a kind that ought to suit you very well. If I don't help you win the griffons, you naturally owe me nothing. But if I do, you'll still take possession of all the animals, and simply pay a fee for my assistance. You'll go home with everything you came for, and I'll reap sufficient profit to satisfy my father even though it's not the prize he sent me to fetch."

"Some people say you've already made a deal with Mario Bez. That you were seen talking to him the last time his skyship flew back into town."

"Seeking opportunity, a trader talks to all sorts of people. That doesn't mean I wouldn't prefer a covenant with an

honorable officer over a sordid arrangement with an infamous mercenary."

"Hm," Dulsær murmured as he turned the proposal over in his mind, looking for a flaw. Feeling a bit like a cunning, greedy merchant himself, he asked, "How big a fee?"

* * * * *

As she tramped along, planting the butt of her staff with every other stride, the snow crunching beneath her war boots, Jhesrhi kept an eye out for tracks and figures lurking behind the trees. It was probably a waste of effort. Aoth and Zyl were likely to spot trouble before she did. But life had taught her never to entrust her safety entirely to others if she could avoid it.

"How much farther?" Aoth asked, a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Not far," the black hare answered, "so stay close. We'll come up on the sentries soon, and we want to make sure they understand the two of you are with me. Humans aren't generally welcome this deep in the forest."

Aoth snorted. "Does Rashemen have any woods that *aren't* forbidden, sacred, or both?" he asked.

"Not many," Zyl replied. "Fundamentally, it's a land of spirits and fey, who tolerate what they consider to be lesser creatures just as long as we show the proper respect."

" 'We?' " Jhesrhi asked.

Zyl laughed a shrill, pulsing sound enough like a human wail of pain to be unnerving. "I really am just an animal, a fire spirit," he said, "although one who's learned some useful tricks since a precocious child awakened him on a whim. There are those who'd say you belong in the courts of the fey more than I do."

"For some reason," she said, "you have a mistaken impression of me. It's true I've acquired an affinity with fire, but I'm still a human being."

"If it pleases you to think so, lady, then who am I to argue otherwise?" Zyl said.

"I see one of your sentries," said Aoth. "Ahead and a little to the left."

With that to guide her, Jhesrhi spotted the watcher, too. He somewhat resembled a slender elf archer with pointed ears and slanted eyes. But the elves she'd seen had little body hair, whereas the sentry appeared to have a tawny down covering him. His face was narrower and less manlike than an elf's, and she couldn't read its expression. Long canines extended from under his upper lip, and smallish antlers jutted from his brow with shiny metal objects attached to the points.

"Interesting," said Aoth. "I haven't run across folk like that before."

"They started out as elves," Zyl said, "or so the story goes. But then, in a time of desperation, they asked a spirit called the Stag King to save them from the doom that was coming to claim them. He agreed to do it if he could lie with three of their maidens. Perhaps not understanding just how strong his blood would prove to be, the elves agreed. After a few generations, they were all like him, and made no objection when he returned to rule as *their* king."

As Jhesrhi and her companions marched onward, Aoth pointed out other archers watching from hiding like the first. In time, a silvery chiming like sleigh bells sounded at the sellswords' backs.

"What's that?" asked Aoth.

"The bells in their antlers," Zyl replied. "Their way of telling you that now that you've come this far, you can't turn back."

"In other words," said Aoth, "they think they can scare us onward like beaters flushing game. That's not very flattering or friendly, either."

"They're not a friendly people."

“Then why serve them if you’re not really a dark fey yourself?”

“You’ve seen that I have powers.”

“Yes.”

“Well, like the elves in the story, I had to bargain for what I wanted with one who was willing to trade with me. Now, look sharp. We’re almost there.”

The travelers wound their way through a thick stand of ash and alder to the clearing on the other side. At first, Jhesrhi couldn’t see any reason why no trees grew on that particular patch of ground. Then she took another step, and a castle wavered into view in front of her. The lines of the spires and battlements had once been graceful and harmonious, and the walls once adorned with intricate mosaics. But everything was crumbling and faded.

“What world is that fortress actually standing in?” she asked.

“This one, currently,” said Zyl. “And it hardly ever slides except at night.”

Jhesrhi supposed it was as reassuring an answer as she had any right to expect. She and Aoth followed the hare through the gate and across a snowy courtyard. The inhabitants watched as they passed. The females didn’t have antlers, but that didn’t make the contours of their long, tapered faces any less strange.

In the Stag King’s hall itself, two naked males were wrestling, alternately grappling like humans and slamming and grinding their antlers together. The little round bells wired to their points chimed with every violent, straining motion. That, the grunting, the slap of flesh on flesh, and the click of cloven hooves on the floor were the only sounds in evidence. Unlike a human audience, who would surely be cheering their favorites on, a ring of spectators watched the contest in silence.

“Wait here,” said Zyl. He hopped around the onlookers and out of sight.

The bout ended shortly thereafter, when the stag men locked antlers, and one flipped the other off his feet with a savage wrenching motion that involved his entire body. At last the onlookers showed their appreciation—or at least Jhesrhi assumed that was what they intended—by nodding and setting the bells attached to their own antlers ringing.

From the far end of the hall, someone called, “Clear a path! Let me see what the hare dragged in!” The voice was as deep as a cyclops’s.

The stag men in the hall pivoted to regard the strangers by the door, but if they were surprised or alarmed to discover them there, Jhesrhi couldn’t tell. They vacated the center of the chamber, and she had her first look at the Stag King, slouched on a finely carved wooden throne.

His height and bulk matched his voice, and though his high-backed chair was more than big enough for any elf to sit in comfort, he appeared squeezed into it. But despite his hugeness, and antlers that dwarfed those borne by any of his descendants, in some ways, he looked more manlike—or elflike—than they did. His features were human enough to bespeak arrogance.

He waved a hand, and four guards started forward. It seemed obvious that they intended to manhandle the mercenaries up to the throne.

Jhesrhi felt the old familiar loathing at the prospect of being touched. “Aoth?” she said.

“I agree,” he answered, sidestepping to distance himself from her. “Let’s make a different kind of first impression.”

With a thought, she brought the fire inside her leaping forth to cloak her from head to toe. She also tapped the butt of her staff on the cracked and grimy floor, and the torches in the wall sconces—evidently deemed unnecessary because shafts of sunlight shone through the openings higher up—all burst into flame.

Aoth meanwhile leveled his spear, set the head aglow with blue phosphorescence, and swung it in an arc to point at

each oncoming guard in turn. They faltered, and so did almost every other stag man in the hall.

"I told you they were mages," said Zyl. Jhesrhi noticed that he was sitting up on his haunches at the foot of the Stag King's throne.

"Did you also tell him we claim 'guest right'?" asked Aoth. "That means nobody should be trying to lay hands on us."

"I trust Zyl's judgment within limits," the Stag King said. "Still, it's one thing for him to tell me you have power and mettle, and another for me to see for myself. Now, I have." He beckoned. "Come forward."

Jhesrhi drew her fire back inside herself, and Aoth raised his spear to point straight up again. They advanced side by side to the dais. Aoth's bow was deep enough to show respect, but no deeper. She copied it as best she could.

"So," the spirit said. "Interesting. Two mortals, both reborn in fire of one sort or another."

"I didn't tell Zyl about that particular part of my past," Aoth replied. "You fey are good at seeing what lies under the surface. Or else you've heard of me."

The Stag King grinned. So close, his massive frame had a musky smell, pungent but not unpleasant. "I'd be a poor host if I said I *hadn't* heard of you, wouldn't I, Aoth Fezim, and so bruised your pride?" he said. "But then, I'm a poor host anyway, offering no refreshment." He clapped his hands and called out in Elvish, "Mulled cider for our guests!"

It only took a moment for a female to enter through an archway carrying steaming earthenware goblets on a tray. The cups didn't all match.

Aoth shot Jhesrhi a warning glance, a reminder she didn't need. When she, the war mage, and the Stag King had each taken a cup and pledged one another, she only pretended to sip.

But apparently she or Aoth didn't pretend well enough, because the Stag King cocked his head and asked, "Isn't the brew to your taste?"

“It might be pleasant,” said Aoth, “to spend a hundred years in revelry that would pass like a single night for us. But our business won’t wait.”

The hulking spirit laughed. It occurred to Jhesrhi that the action might have set the bells in his antlers chiming except that, as she observed, he didn’t have any. Perhaps, since he possessed the ability to speak, unlike his subjects, he saw no need for them.

“Evidently,” he said, “the two of you have heard your share of nursery fables and tavern tales.”

Aoth shrugged. “A person can only act on the basis of whatever information comes his way,” he said. “That’s why you’re fortunate that Lady Coldcreek, Zyl, and I are here today. We have important tidings to share.”

Tilting back his head, and so clicking his antlers on the back of his throne, the Stag King drank from his cup and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Yes,” he said. “My trusty spy said the durthans have risen to resume their old quarrel with the hathrans, this time with new allies. But should that concern me? I helped the hathrans once. It entertained me. But who’s to say it would do so a second time?”

“As I understand it,” said Aoth, “most dark fey sided with the durthans. Even though the fomorian lady you sent Zyl to spy on wasn’t all that keen on the idea, it’s a safe bet that many will again. And if they defeat the hathrans and the Iron Lord, isn’t it likely that they’ll want to settle old scores? You’d be wiser to fight them now, before they build any more strength, and before they kill the folk who are willing to stand with you.”

The Stag King grunted. “Perhaps,” he said. “Or maybe, now that the hathrans have mighty wizards like you and the lady here to help them, my assistance is unnecessary. Or perhaps I’ll simply go away, deep into the Feywild where no old foe will ever find me.” He waved a hand in a gesture that

encompassed the hall. "You see the dreariness that passes for my court. My blood may have been a little too potent."

Jhesrhi scowled. "You'd forsake your own children?" she asked. "Abandon them to suffer and die without you?"

The spirit grinned. "Forgive me if, for whatever reason, that pierces to the quick," he said. "But perhaps it doesn't have to be that way. I *might* be amenable to marching off to war if someone was willing to make it worth my while."

"I'd imagine," said Aoth, "that when the war is done, the Rashemi will be happy to reward an ally."

"But the hathrans and the Iron Lord aren't here," the Stag King replied. "Nor do you truly have the authority to offer treasure on their behalf. Whereas you and Jhesrhi Coldcreek *are* here. What will *you* pay? Will she indenture herself to me as Zyl has done?"

"Are you sure?" the Stag King asked as he turned his gaze on Jhesrhi. "I'm not such a bad master. Zyl will vouch for that. I can teach you a great deal, and make it easier to complete your transformation."

"It is complete," she said through gritted teeth. "And I like it where I am."

The Stag King turned back to Aoth. "Well, then, Captain, that leaves you," he said.

"I have wealth to barter," the Thayan replied. "Gold, some talismans, enchanted weapons, and such. It's not all in Rashemen, but if we make a deal, I'll get it to you."

The enormous creature grinned. "No need. Your greatest treasure is here: eyes infected with the Blue Fire that changed the whole world. Eyes with truesight. Give me one of them. You'll still see better than any other human in the world."

Aoth snorted and said, "Unless some foe sneaks up on the wrong flank."

"Then you decline the offer?"

"Of course. I explained that it's in your best interest to ally with the hathrans and me. That should be enough. I

shouldn't have to haggle with you like I'm trying to buy a carpet in a marketplace, and it's laughable that you think I'd give up one of my most valuable officers, or mutilate myself, to purchase your help. With all due respect, it's nowhere near that important. So sit idle in this tumbledown pile if it pleases you. Jhes and I will find a way to beat the undead without you."

The Stag King glared. "Is that your final word?" he asked.

"Yes," Aoth replied.

The spirit's glower softened into a crooked smile. "Well, I may not be a rug merchant, but you still can't blame me for trying," he said. "But all right. My warriors and I will accompany you to the Fortress of the Half-Demon. We'll see what we can learn and whom we can kill."

S E V E N

Zyl had alluded to berserkers cutting themselves and frothing at the mouth. But though Vandar fought like a madman when the fury held him in its sway, Cera hadn't seen him do either of those things, and so she'd assumed the hare was exaggerating.

She didn't think so anymore. Even though the warriors of the Griffon Lodge weren't headed into battle at the moment, and the excitement they were experiencing was likely only a shadow of what they would feel then, a few were indeed slicing their own brawny arms and chests. Others gnashed their teeth in a gesture seemingly intended to mimic a griffon snapping its beak, a gesture that often sent spittle flying through the air. Meanwhile, the rest had other ways of acting crazy. They screeched like griffons, swept their arms wide like griffons spreading their wings, or punched their neighbors for no particular reason.

Which was to say, with Vandar having delivered his news, his brothers were raising the feral spirit they'd likely need when they reached the Fortress of the Half-Demon. Cera suspected that Jet, standing with Vandar and her in front of the crowd, was a potent source of inspiration. The berserkers might constitute the Griffon Lodge, but how many of them had ever been so close to their totem?

At first, Jet regarded the berserkers' display with what Cera had learned to recognize as dour tolerance, an attitude of "Humans are idiots, but there's nothing to be done about it." Soon, however, he raised his black-feathered head high. Some of the Rashemi fell silent, and the echoing clamor inside the lodge diminished.

"What is it?" Cera asked.

"I need to get outside," the familiar replied. He glanced at a tall mullioned glass window, surely an expensive luxury and object of pride in that rustic land. Already wincing, Cera imagined him leaping and smashing through it. But instead he turned and bounded down the length of the smoky torch-lit hall toward the double doors in the far wall. Startled berserkers scrambled out of the way, and she and Vandar scurried to keep up.

She threw open the doors. Jet leaped out into the dirty, trodden snow, and she and Vandar followed. She heard the sound that the familiar had caught even inside the noisy building. Faint with distance, the cries of other griffons mingled with the whistle of the wind.

"Is it the wild ones?" she asked.

"No," said Jet. "It's the ones from Aglarond."

"How can you tell?" Vandar asked.

"For one thing," said Jet, a grim note in his voice, "I'd recognize the call of that male with the blue eyes. Trust me, it's the Aglarondans, and the reason they're calling to one another is that their riders are rousing them to fly."

"In the middle of a cold winter's night," Vandar said. "Folcoerr Dulsær would only order that if he suddenly thinks he knows where to go to strike a blow at the undead ..."

Cera smiled. "If Jet and I shadow them, we can find out exactly what they're up to," she said.

"That's a good idea," the berserker replied. "But I should be the one to go."

"I'm no griffonrider," Cera said. "But I've at least spent enough time aloft to know how to sit in the saddle and trust

Jet to take care of me. Besides, you need to get your brothers ready to travel.”

Although Yhelbruna had told all the outlanders they could ask for help as needed, Cera and Vandar had judged that the Griffon Lodge needed to sneak out of Immilmar and march on the Fortress of the Half-Demon alone. Otherwise there was a fair chance that the Aglarondans or Mario Bez’s sellswords—either of whom could travel faster in the sky than the Rashemi could on the ground—would race to their destination ahead of them, accomplish whatever could be accomplished there, and claim the credit for doing it.

Vandar scowled. But he said, “All right, lady, but be careful. My impression of the Aglarondans is that they wouldn’t try to hurt you themselves. But they might not care if the creatures they’re hunting attacked a rival and a spy.”

With that he turned and started giving orders to the nearest berserkers. Jet and Cera ran toward the shed where they’d stowed the griffon’s tack. He bounded, lashing his wings with each leap, and instantly outdistanced her as she labored with her short legs through the snow.

When she caught up, he crouched so she could heave the saddle onto his back. She cinched it, climbed on, and buckled the safety straps with the meticulous slowness of a novice rider. Somewhat to her surprise, Jet didn’t offer any acerbic remarks.

He broke into a run, sprang, lashed his wings, and climbed into the sky the instant she was ready. She caught her breath at the suddenness of it. She trusted Jet and had come to enjoy flying, but that didn’t mean she was at ease every single moment.

As he wheeled to follow the Aglarondans, Jet rasped, “Your mace keeps bumping me.”

“Oh! Sorry!” she said. She slipped the dangling weapon off her wrist and into one of the sheaths built into the front of the saddle. The holder made a sucking sound as a minor enchantment made it clamp down tight. “Do you think we

can just sneak in among the Aglarondans without anybody noticing us?"

"I'll try," Jet replied. "Don't count on the griffons mistaking me for one on their own. And if they do realize we're strangers, they may cry out. But with luck, their riders won't understand what it means." His tone made plain his scorn for human stupidity.

"That sounds good," Cera said. The night was even colder up here in the sky, and she shivered. "I'm going to ask the Keeper to warm me. Shall I do the same for you?"

The familiar laughed, a bloodcurdling sound she hadn't recognized the first time she'd heard it. "Don't bother," he said. Nature made griffons properly. We don't need magic just to endure the winter wind."

"Well, aren't you special," she said as she began to murmur a prayer. Warmth suffused her body.

They flew on in silence for a while. She peered into the darkness ahead for a first glimpse of the Aglarondans and breathed in Jet's smell: a not-unpleasant mix of bird and cat.

Eventually the griffon asked, "Are you going to stay with Aoth?"

The question surprised her. She knew Jet was intelligent enough to understand the choice she was facing, but he often considered such foolish human dilemmas unworthy of his attention.

"I don't know," she said. "Do you ... think it would be hard on him if I don't?"

The griffon laughed again. "He's a hundred years old," he replied. "He's had more mates than he can remember. He's survived more battles and foes than he can remember. He can survive losing you, too."

Cera sighed. "Yes. Of course," she said.

"But that doesn't mean he'd like it," Jet continued. "He cares about you, and you fit in his life. You fit with the rest of us."

She touched her hand to the feathers on his neck. "Thank you," she said. "That's good to know."

"There's no reason to talk in that hushed cooing way to me," the griffon said. "I didn't say that I care what you do. Look, there are the Aglarondans. Can you see them yet?"

She couldn't at that moment, but when he carried her closer, she made out vague shapes racing through the sky. As Jet had anticipated, some of the other griffons screeched at the newcomers' approach, but as he'd also expected, the riders didn't pay it any mind except to order their steeds to cease their clamor. She and Jet flew along quietly on their rivals' flank.

The Aglarondans were headed pretty much straight east from Immilmar, essentially following the track named the Huhrong's Road. If one could consider any part of northern Rashemen civilized, it was that corridor. Cera occasionally caught a glimpse of hamlets and isolated farmhouses, and land that appeared to be fields and pastures rather than woods and lonely moors. If the undead were raiding there, then that, like the attack on the sacred grove north of the Ashenwood, attested to the boldness and seriousness of the threat.

The Aglarondans' griffons started screeching again.

"Do they sense undead?" Cera asked, keeping her voice low.

"No," Jet answered. "They smell horseflesh."

A moment later, Cera smelled it, too. She realized that wasn't right. She wasn't a beast with a beast's keen senses. She was a human being, who might not smell a horse even if she was standing right beside it. She definitely shouldn't have been able to smell one from high above the ground.

The Aglarondans' steeds swooped lower.

In a superficial sense, that wasn't strange because horse was a griffon's favorite food. Still, properly trained mounts would ignore the distraction if they were working, and if

they didn't, experienced riders could quickly reassert control.

But that wasn't what was happening. The Aglarondans barked orders at their mounts, and their voices became louder and shriller as the griffons ignored the initial commands.

The smell of warm, juicy meat thickened in the cold night air. Lightheaded, Cera realized her mouth was watering. She looked for the horses and finally spotted them. Apparently oblivious to the threat descending on them, the animals were standing placidly in a snowy paddock.

The griffon in the lead—Cera wondered if it was Folcoerr Dulsær's—slammed down on a horse and crushed it to the ground. Screaming, the equine thrashed. The griffin dipped its beak and tore loose a first chunk of flesh. The man astride the steed bellowed at it and pounded it with the butt of his lance. His efforts were no more effective than the maimed horse's struggles to writhe free.

More griffons plunged down, each on its chosen prey. Then Jet screeched, furling his wings, and dived.

The unexpected plummet jolted Cera out of her daze. "Amaunator!" she called. "Please, give us your light!"

The god's power manifested as a warm golden glow in her hands. She leaned and stretched forward as far as she could and laid them on the sides of Jet's head.

The warmth surged out of her flesh and into the griffon's. For a heartbeat, she was afraid it hadn't been enough, for, while her deity's might was limitless, a mortal's ability to channel it was not. But with a snap like the crack of a whip, Jet extended his wings and leveled off. He hurtled along just above the slaughter, while Cera winced at the ripped flesh and spilled blood and viscera, at the screams of the dying horses, the crunching as the griffons bit and clawed through bone, and the frantic, bewildered cries of the Aglarondans.

Then the horses changed.

Had it happened more gradually, Cera might have not have spotted it immediately, because by then, all the animals were shredded, eviscerated, dismembered, dying, or dead. But they changed into a different sort of ruined thing virtually all at once, as a wave of mottled discoloration swept through them. The smell of raw meat and spilled blood in the air became a nauseating stench of decay.

The equines' struggles had become feeble, turned to mere twitches and shuddering, or subsided altogether. But paradoxically, as their aspect changed from that of creatures killed moments before to that of ones that had lain dead for some time, their movements became far more vigorous. They no longer appeared to care about escaping. Rather, their only concern was biting a griffon and its rider, or battering them with their hooves.

Even though the griffons were gorging on putrescence—and likely had been all along, with only illusion making it appear otherwise—their riders still couldn't compel them to stop. Thus the soldiers' only option was to stab at the undead horses with their lances. They set about it with fierce determination, oblivious to the other tattered, shambling forms rearing up out of the snow all around them.

Jet streaked beyond the edge of the battle. Cera looked over her shoulder but could already see little of the rapidly dwindling figures at her back.

"Turn around!" she said. "We have to help them!"

"They're our rivals," Jet replied. "We want them to fail."

"Turn!" she said, then realized that despite his protest, he was already wheeling. As he lashed his wings and flew back at the combatants, she reached out to the Keeper and prayed for all the strength that he could give her. The magic flared inside her like the Yellow Sun itself, filling her with an ecstasy that nearly washed away her ability to think. Almost, but not quite. She still remembered her purpose.

She swung her hand over her head, and golden light blazed down from the black starry sky to illuminate the field

below. The undead cringed, and rotten flesh sizzled and crisped like bacon frying in a pan. But those effects were incidental. Cera's actual intent was to free every griffon from the enchantment trammeling its mind, and she shouted with joy when the mighty beasts started to spring away from the horse-things and shake out their wings.

One griffon leaped but fell back down onto the ground. Another started to trot and then staggered off balance. A third gave a strangled cry and vomited.

Cera realized the rotten horseflesh had poisoned the griffons, and they could no longer fly. She snarled an obscenity.

The things that had hidden under the snow—Cera thought they were mostly ghouls, although the dark made it difficult to tell for certain—lunged at their prey from all sides. They clawed at the stricken griffons and reached to drag the riders from their saddles.

Cera asked Amaunator for more power. Somehow seeming both to descend from above and to rise from deep within her, it came in the form of the deity's wrath, of his loathing for creatures that made a mockery of the natural progression from life into death and what came after. The magic was as hot as a cauterizing iron, but she held it without discomfort. It made her feel as taut as a drawn bow ready to drive an arrow.

She swept her hand over her head and downward. Light blazed from her fingers. One of the ghouls crumbled to dust in an instant. The Keeper's power burned holes in two more, and still others cringed, dropping onto their bellies and hiding their fanged, vaguely canine faces in the gory snow.

But those were the only three that fell. For a moment, she wasn't sure why, because it had certainly felt like she'd hurled a prodigious flare of the sun god's power. Then she spotted the grotesque figure looking back up at her with three pairs of empty eye sockets.

She'd never encountered such an undead before. But from Aoth's tales of the War of the Zulkirs, she recognized the armored figure with the war hammer in his hand and the three skulls perched on his one set of shoulders as a skull lord. Such beings possessed arcane abilities, and it was likely his power was shielding the lesser undead from the full effect of Cera's magic.

Looking back at her, the skull lord tossed an arm that wore a bulky gauntlet like a falconer's glove. Vague, murky shapes, somewhat manlike but with long, curved horns and batlike wings, burst into existence above his hand. They flew at her and Jet.

The griffon instantly started flying faster and veering back and forth and up and down. Cera didn't have the skill—or the psychic link—that would enable her to anticipate the sudden shifts, and they whipped her around in the saddle. Even worse, Jet's headlong progress carried them away from those on the ground who so urgently needed their help.

"The Aglarondans!" she gasped.

"We have to protect ourselves first!" Jet rasped. "We can't help anybody else if shadow demons are tearing us apa—"

One of the ghostly creatures suddenly appeared on the right. It slashed with a clawed hand and just missed the familiar's wing, at which point Cera belatedly realized the point of his racing, seemingly erratic progress. Jet knew shadow demons had the ability to shift through space. Thus, an unpredictable, constantly changing course was the only hope of avoiding them.

Jet wrenched himself to the right, leaving the spirit behind. Unfortunately, it was still close enough to try a different form of attack. Though she couldn't define precisely what she perceived or how, Cera suddenly sensed its malice stabbing at her like a dagger leaping at her eye.

She felt her spirit separating from her body as it had when she and Aoth had performed the ritual of discovery in the temple garden in Soolabax. But then it had been of Cera's

own volition. There, above the Hurong's Road, some power was dragging her out, and the shadow pounced at her to pierce her material form to its core and fill the void.

"Keeper!" she cried. The god's power thrust her soul back into its proper place. The demon splashed against an invisible barrier, its limbs and horned head losing all definition.

Despite Jet's dogged efforts at evasion, another demon appeared right in front of him, so close he had no hope of avoiding it. The spirit plunged its claws into his shoulder, holding on with one hand and raking with the other. Meanwhile, another shadow materialized above the griffon's left wing and snatched hold of that.

Cera drew another measure of Amaunator's power, pressed her hand to Jet's back, and made him shine like he himself was a piece of the sun. Creatures of living darkness, the demons released their holds and flung themselves away from the holy radiance.

They still weren't done, however. The glow flickered and dimmed as bursts of shadow threatened to taint and drown it. The invasive gloom came with freezing cold that made Cera gasp and Jet's body jerk beneath her.

She channeled still more of Amaunator's strength and poured it into her enchantment. Jet's body burned brighter and brighter, although the glare never hindered her vision or his, until finally the blasts of frigid darkness stopped.

For a moment, she felt fierce satisfaction. Then she remembered the Aglarondans and looked down.

Though Jet's light was dimming as she'd stopped channeling strength into it, it was still bright enough to reveal the scene below in gruesome detail. Every griffonrider and every one of the steeds lay mangled and motionless; only the undead were moving. Those that subsisted on flesh gobbled it as greedily as the griffons had earlier devoured the poisonous filth. Others continued slashing and pounding their fallen foes, either because they enjoyed it or because

no one had told them it was all right to stop. Some were violating Aglarondan corpses in stranger and even more sickening ways.

The skull lord stood amid the carnage. Cera made out a pair of shadow demons hovering above him. The undead captain beckoned, challenging her.

She yearned to accept. It was a sunlady's duty to destroy the walking dead, and in that instance, the obligation meshed perfectly with her desires. She hated the things below her. For massacring the Aglarondans in such a foul and treacherous way. For nearly killing Jet and her. For making her fail when she'd wanted so desperately to succeed.

Still, she recognized that it would be suicide to continue a fight against such overwhelming odds, so she didn't protest when Jet wheeled and fled. She simply used more of her rapidly diminishing mystical strength to close his wounds.

After a time, she said, "That was a trap. A trap for the griffonriders specifically."

"I think so, too," said Jet. "The horses gave it away."

"But does that make sense?" she asked. "How could the enemy be sure of catching them and no one else?"

"You humans with your kinked way of thinking are better at figuring out things like that," Jet said with a grunt.

Maybe they were. But no matter how Cera turned the matter over in her mind, all she could see was that five groups of outlanders had taken up Yhelbruna's quest, and there were only four remaining.

* * * * *

Dai Shan had observed long before that the important moments in life weren't spaced out evenly. Either nothing happened, or situations that demanded attention arrived in quick succession.

So it was that night. He'd only just dismissed the shadow he'd created to spy on the Griffon Lodge, when the thing he'd retrieved from the spot where Falconer had instructed him to look for it gave a little bleating cry from the brassbound leather chest where he'd hidden it.

He crossed the chamber to the chest, unlocked it with the proper word, and opened it. Raking aside layers of clothing, he lifted out the undead demonbinder's gift—if gift was the appropriate term for such a grotesquerie. Though Dai Shan too had studied what many considered to be an unsavory form of the mystic arts, as well as the techniques his family used to interrogate and chastise prisoners, touching the thing made his skin crawl.

It looked like the right-hand side of a baby that had been split lengthwise, a freakish baby born under a curse. What there was of the head was abnormally big and bulbous, and patches of its skin were as scaly as a snake's. The body's three fingers and two toes ended in black claws. When Dai Shan had smuggled it into the castle and hidden it away, it had seemed dead, as by all rights it should certainly have been. But it squirmed feebly and opened an eye that, though it rolled from side to side, was all bloodshot sclera, with no discernible pupil or iris.

Dai Shan assumed that once the creature had been a complete imp. Falconer had presumably called it forth from one of the lower worlds, cut it in two, kept one half for himself, and had some swift, stealthy servant carry the other to Immilmar.

The half-imp's eye stopped moving, presumably because it was looking at Dai Shan, although it was impossible to tell for certain. Then it spoke his name in Falconer's deep, hollow, oddly accented voice.

"Noble captain," Dai Shan replied, and imagined his own voice issuing from the mouth of the half-imp still in the undead mage's keeping. "I trust you have good news."

"The Aglarondans are dead," Falconer said.

“Excellent,” the Shou replied. “I told you my drug would make the griffons particularly susceptible to enchantment.” And it hadn’t even been especially difficult to contaminate the winged steeds’ food supply. While it would be an exaggeration to say that Folcoerr Dulsær had come to trust him, once they had sealed their pact, and the griffonriders had grown used to seeing him in their encampment, the opportunity had almost inevitably presented itself.

He wished it was as easy to juggle the half-imp. Dai Shan needed to hold onto it to strengthen the magic, but he couldn’t find a way to keep the cold, slimy exposed organs from coming into contact with his skin.

“I suppose it did,” the skull lord said. “But something else happened that we didn’t foresee.”

Dai Shan frowned slightly. “And what was that?” he asked.

“There was another griffonrider there, a sun priestess on a black mount,” Falconer said. “And she got away.”

“Interesting,” said Dai Shan. And it was. He hadn’t realized that anyone else who’d undertaken the “quest” was spying on the competition, and his respect for Aoth Fezim and his compatriots went up a notch. “But if the Aglarondans didn’t tell her I sent them to their doom, that shouldn’t be a problem. And apparently they didn’t, or by now someone would have called on me with inconvenient questions.”

The thing in his hands jerked and shuddered like an epileptic in the throes of a seizure. To his disgust, its convulsions squeezed out fluid and sludge to stain his hands and sleeves. Then the fit subsided.

“Who can you kill next?” Falconer asked.

“I don’t know,” Dai Shan said. “Do the worthy magus and his circle trust me now? Do we have an arrangement? If not, then I fear the answer must be no one.”

“Yes,” Falconer said. “We have an agreement. Continue helping my allies and me, and when we win, you can have the griffons.”

"That's splendid," replied the Shou. "It would also be splendid if my new partner would tell me at least a little more about himself and his comrades. Such a display of trust would make me feel even more confident about the commitment I've made. It might also give me added insight into how I can best assist you."

The half-imp convulsed again, biting down so hard that one of its jagged teeth cracked. Squeezed out of its body cavity, a little green egg of an organ fell and splatted on the floor.

"Undead have come to these lands from somewhere far away," Falconer said at length. "I myself don't understand where exactly. I gather that the face of the world has changed significantly since my former master made me as I am and charged me with my thankless tasks. But the newcomers are waking and rallying all those who once craved dominion, even the filthy Raumvirans."

Dai Shan considered himself an expert on many things. The history of long-dead empires was not among them. Still, he knew enough to ask, "And are the proud and valiant Nars pleased to welcome such wretches into the ranks?"

"For now, they serve a purpose," Falconer said. "We look forward to the time when that will no longer be that case."

Dai Shan smiled. "I fully understand," he replied. "And I thank you for all the information you've confided so far. But I'd also appreciate one or two *details*. Perhaps the mighty and sagacious captain will tell me where he's established his stronghold."

"You don't need to know that," said the skull lord.

"Your trick with the imp is ingenious," said Dai Shan, "but my half is deteriorating rapidly, and I suspect yours is as well. We can't count on being able to use this form of communication whenever we need it. If I know where you're based, I can dispatch a messenger."

Falconer hesitated before saying, "All right. I see your point. Rest assured, it's not the only stronghold my army has

occupied. But I'm based in the Fortress of the Half-Demon."

And the warriors of the Griffon Lodge were sneaking north. Dai Shan had their destination, although how they knew to go there and the current whereabouts of Aoth Fezim and Jhesrhi Coldcreek remained unclear.

He considered telling Falconer to expect callers. But he quickly decided against it for two reasons.

The first was that he'd already done the undead marauders one service tonight. It would be wasteful to perform another so quickly. Doling them out in a measured fashion was the way to keep Falconer from feeling beholden to him.

The other was that he might decide he actually wanted the Griffon Lodge to take the fortress by surprise. In the multilayered game of Stones he was playing, there was no reason to close any line of development prematurely.

After a moment or two, Falconer spoke again and roused the Shou from his contemplation. "Does that satisfy you?" he asked.

"For now, brave champion, it does indeed," said Dai Shan. "And I thank you for the honor of your confidence."

"Then let's get back to my question. Whom do we kill next?"

"I'll have to explore the possibilities. Most of your enemies are less gullible than Folcoerr Dulsær."

"Well, then, while you're exploring, maybe you can do something else for us."

Falconer then proceeded to explain, and Dai Shan found himself intrigued. Because, despite his own expertise in the mystic arts, he didn't understand what the point of such an operation would be.

And unfortunately, his trader's instincts told him it would be futile to ask for explanations. For the time being, he'd extracted everything from Falconer that he was going to get.

E I G H T

If anyone were to catch Dai Shan exploring the cellars under the Iron Lord's citadel, the results could be unfortunate. But the Shou soon decided detection was so unlikely that he didn't even bother exerting his mystical abilities to hide from prying eyes. He simply prowled along like a mundane, but exceedingly accomplished, sneak thief.

Some of the cold, echoing vaults were storerooms, and others, merely empty. Noting the lack of dungeons, Dai Shan wondered what Mangan Uruk did with captured outlaws and other prisoners who fell into his hands. Maybe, like the barbarian he was, Mandan slaughtered them on the spot, without even considering the potential advantages of keeping them alive.

If so, then Dai Shan *definitely* wanted to avoid discovery. He wanted to find what Falconer claimed was here for the finding and return to his quarters and his bed before anybody missed him.

Before long, he left kegs, crates, sacks, and the dim, wavering glow of the occasional oil lamp behind. In order to investigate the chambers beyond the uttermost reach of the light, he would require one of his arcane talents, the ability to see in darkness.

The chambers appeared, despite what Falconer had said, to be empty of anything but dust and spider webs. Dai Shan

felt a twinge of impatience. He took a breath and exhaled it. He reminded himself to search calmly and methodically, and, whatever he discovered, to devise a way to turn it to his advantage.

Yet, when at last he came to something promising, he nearly passed it by. Someone had done a good job of sealing the archway with blocks of sandstone to match the ones that made up the surrounding wall. Still, there was a subtle variation in the color and an interruption in the regular spacing of the mortared cracks.

Dai Shan placed his hands against the obstruction and gave it an experimental shove. It felt quite solid, which was unfortunate. He had the tools, mundane and otherwise, to open almost any door, but passing through a wall was more challenging.

Although such a feat was possible, of course. He opened one of the concealed pouches contained in his belt, took out a bit of glowing quartz, and set it on the floor. To exploit his power over shadows, he first needed to create one, namely, his own.

The light from the quartz splashed his shadow across the floor and up the wall. He focused his will and said, "Wake." The shadow sprang away from where it lay.

As it did so, Dai Shan felt a jab of pain behind his solar plexus. Evidently, he'd been overexerting that particular talent. But it wasn't easy keeping tabs on everyone and everything of potential interest in Rashemen all by himself.

And at any rate, all was well. His heart was still beating, and he hadn't reduced himself to one of the mad, maimed wretches called the Shadowless. "Go through," he said. "You know what I'm looking for."

The shadow ran its hands over the stonework, plugging the arch. Its fingers occasionally seemed to snag on the blocks and mortared cracks, stretch, and then snap back to a more normal length when they pulled free.

Dai Shan knew that the entity was seeking some tiny hole or fissure that extended all the way through. Writhing through a gap would make the barrier easier to penetrate.

It didn't find one, but fortunately for an agent that lacked physicality in the truest sense, an opening was merely a convenience, not a necessity. The shadow drew back a pace, then lunged at the obstruction.

Dai Shan felt a stunning jolt, as if he'd thrown himself headlong at a solid barrier. The shadow vanished. Apparently some long-dead hathran had cast a ward on the wall to prevent such entities from passing through.

Dai Shan examined his face by touch. Despite the throbbing, his nose was not broken, nor did he find any scrapes or cuts. The impact had only occurred in his mind. He'd suspected as much, but it made sense to be sure.

Dai Shan could only think of one other way to get through the barrier, and it required a certain amount of risk. Was his particular ploy truly that important? Couldn't he simply tell Falconer that he'd been unable to access the proper part of the cellars? By the Black Moon, it would even be the truth.

And perhaps everything would work out thereafter. But once Dai Shan set his mind to a task, he preferred to accomplish it, in part because of a conviction that success bred further success, and failure, only failure. And the thought of failing in Rashemen and returning home without the griffons, of his father's gibes and sneers, of being consigned to trivial matters while his brothers swaggered like princes and steered the destiny of the House, was insupportable.

When the affair is over, he thought, I'll keep the blue-eyed griffon for myself. That will be my reward for daring what I'm about to do.

He took another look at the hidden arch. It was fairly wide. He estimated that four smallish men like himself could stand shoulder to shoulder in front of it.

He turned to the shadow he was again casting. "Wake," he said.

The pain in his chest lasted longer, as if some tormentor were taking his time sliding in a knife. But he endured it, and the shadow leaped up.

As soon as it did, another lay in its place, as was the way of shadows. Dai Shan animated that one, too, and had to grit his teeth to hold in a cry. Regrettably, he couldn't do anything to restrain the tears that ran down his cheeks.

Blinking, he regarded the two living shadows awaiting his command. A voice inside his head whispered that surely two were enough.

But that was the voice of fear, and a Shou gentleman couldn't heed it. Dai Shan had decided that three minions would maximize his chances of success, and three it would be. "Wake," he said.

He'd expected the final act of creation to be the most agonizing of all, and probably it was. But when he woke sprawled on the floor, he couldn't truly remember it, or passing out, either, although he felt like a gong shivering its way to silence a moment after the beater's stroke.

He tried to lift his hand and found that he could. The crystal's glow made the extremity's gray, flat counterpart slide up the wall.

I'm still alive, Dai Shan thought, and still myself. A wild laugh tried to bubble up from the center of him, and he smothered it as dignity required.

He resolved that however urgent the need, he wouldn't bring any more shadows to life for a tenday. Happily, that ability was only one of his strengths. He possessed many others, including the physical vitality that returned to him quickly.

He stood up and said, "Change."

The shadows did, instantly, and suddenly it was like peering into three mirrors, except that each of the reflections stood in a different attitude, none of them

precisely matching their creator's stance. Their thoughts and perceptions stabbed into his own, overlaying his awareness with jumble and cacophony, and he exerted his will to block them out. He didn't want to live through any of them as he'd lived through the agent that first made contact with Falconer. Rather, he wanted to multiply his innate abilities by four.

When the intrusions had faded, and his mind had cleared, he stepped up to the barrier and put his hands on it. His counterparts did the same. Then they all began to shove.

The wall stood as solid as a mountainside.

With his jaw clenched and sweat sliding down his face, Dai Shan shoved harder. He focused on the action until he became it. Until he no longer remembered why he'd undertaken it, nor cared about its success or failure. All that mattered was its perfect articulation.

The surface under his palms shivered, then shifted. With a scraping, banging clatter, a tier of stones fell inward.

With their purpose accomplished, Dai Shan's shadows withered from existence in quick succession. Their creator listened for any indication that the sound of the breach had attracted attention. Except for the thump of his own heartbeat in his ears, the cellars were silent.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Plucking a silk handkerchief from his sleeve, he used it to dab first the sweat from his face and neck and then the drops of blood from the scrapes on his palms. Then he picked up the crystal and climbed through the hole.

On the other side, a staircase descended deeper into the earth. As he stalked downward, he watched for carved sigils, listened for the rustle of leathery wings or the click of claws on stone, and sniffed for the scents of brimstone or putrefaction. It seemed likely that if the ancient Nars had left any demon watchdogs behind, their Rashemi successors had cleared them out. But then again, since the witches and

their followers had seen fit to seal off the lower vaults, they must not have considered them entirely wholesome.

At the bottom of the stairs, Dai Shan suddenly felt the inner jolt that came with sensing he was being watched. He dropped into a fighting crouch and peered about.

The vault before him had five walls with a doorway in the center of each, and a five-pointed mosaic star in the middle of the floor. Smaller geometric figures and words in an unfamiliar language filled the spaces between the radiating arms.

A later hand, working just as meticulously, had painted another layer of glyphs and symbols over the original pentangle. Thanks in part to his sojourn in Rashemen, Dai Shan was able to interpret some of the newer signs. The spiral horns represented Mielikki; the crescents, Selûne; the roses and scythes, Chauntea; and the triangles, all three goddesses together.

After a few moments, Dai Shan stepped through the arch that connected the stairs to the pentagonal chamber. Even when he set his foot on the edge of the mosaic, nothing leaped forth from the empty air to menace him, and he permitted himself a slight smile when he concluded that nothing would.

The Nars had indeed left demons behind, and the hathrans *hadn't* cleared them out. Instead, they'd taken the same approach here as with the Raumathari spirit traps in the High Country. They'd wrapped additional bindings around the originals to make certain the tanar'ri would rot in their cages for all time.

Increasingly confident that he was in no danger, but nonetheless proceeding cautiously, Dai Shan prowled onward into a labyrinth of oblique angles and pentagonal forms. At one point, he felt that something else was watching him with the same profound but impotent malevolence as whatever was chained in the star mosaic. At another, he suddenly imagined himself an eight-legged

creature crawling down a colossal spider web toward the beautiful winged woman stuck in the strands below. When the fancy passed, he suspected he'd just shared the dream of a demon that had gone to sleep in its prison.

But of course, the Nars hadn't left fettered fiends along every inch of the dark and silent maze. Much of the time, Dai Shan found himself exploring spaces that, with their dusty altars, and faded, flaking frescoes depicting the lower worlds, had plainly once served the purposes of spell and ritual but were simply left to inspire a forlorn feeling of abandonment.

Occasionally, despite the gulf of ages and the lack of a common language, he recognized a glyph or image connected to the esoteric disciplines he himself had mastered. He felt the temptation to linger, to try to decipher the overall message and see what secret knowledge he could obtain thereby. But that wasn't why he'd come, and so he kept moving.

Moving and looking for the burial crypts that Falconer claimed were here, Dai Shan just hoped that, despite his ignorance of the customs of the ancient Nars, he'd know them when he saw them. He reassured himself that there couldn't be all that many ways to lay a corpse to rest.

And indeed, he recognized the tombs instantly when a turn brought him to another pentacle mosaic painted over with hathran symbols. On the other side was an arch sealed with a wrought-iron gate, and beyond that, stone sarcophagi, and jars and urns in niches in the walls.

Very well, Dai Shan thought. I found it. I can carry out Falconer's instructions forthwith. The question is, do I want to?

On one level, the answer was, surely not. No rational man would be eager to do the bidding of an undead creature when he didn't even understand what would ensue as a result.

But it was also true that in a game of Stones, a player sometimes found himself obliged to take his turn without sensing how the opponent would respond or what overall strategy he was pursuing. One placed one's stone anyway, because the only alternative was to forfeit.

Till that point, Dai Shan had promised aid to several of the other players in the game that was Rashemen without doing too much—except for facilitating the murder of the Aglarondans—to assist anybody. But clearly, with Falconer making demands of him, and the berserkers of the Griffon Lodge marching on the Fortress of the Half-Demon, the overall situation was evolving, and mere pledges wouldn't serve much longer. If Dai Shan didn't make himself genuinely useful to someone, he was going to lose everybody's trust. So he would. He just had to proceed in a manner that still left room to prevaricate, maneuver, and betray.

The Shou walked around the edge of the design on the floor. He trusted the ancient hathrans' arts, but still, why walk across the center of the demon cage and so make all but certain that the thing within knew someone was outside? He climbed the wrought-iron gate like it was a ladder, and then, not needing to cling with his hands to keep his balance, removed a mallet and chisel from inside his coat. Reciting the words that Falconer had taught him—by rote, disclosing nothing of their meaning—he hammered the first of three vertical notches.

* * * * *

It seemed a wooded slope like any other, until a dark, droning cloud rose from the leafless trees at the top. Some of Vandar's lodge brothers exclaimed in alarm.

They might have turned to run, too, except that the onrushing insects closed the distance before they could shake off their astonishment. Buzzing, the flies and other

creatures bit, stung, clung, and crawled. As he flailed at them, Vandar was nearly unmanned by the unreasoning fear that they'd crawl into his nose and ears, and he'd never get them out.

Sliding and almost falling in the snow, he turned and blundered back down the hillside. It was all he or any of the berserkers could do against such an attack.

His eyes were all but closed to keep the insects out. But despite that handicap, and the swirling haze of the swarms on every side, he glimpsed flickering forms appearing and disappearing in the pale winter sunlight. And as the buzzing waxed and waned, it sometimes articulated words. He couldn't understand them, but he felt the weight of anger they carried.

He prayed the attack would stop once he and his comrades blundered off the slope. It didn't. He supposed the insects couldn't keep it up forever, but there was no way to guess just how long they'd persist or how far they'd give chase.

"Torches!" he cried, half choking on the creatures that instantly flew into his mouth. Only the Forest Queen knew how long it would take to gather wood and set it aflame with the swarms tormenting them, but if they could—

"This is winter!" Cera cried from somewhere overhead. She and Jet had been scouting from on high and had evidently observed their comrades' distress. "The Keeper commands you to go back to sleep!"

The sunlight shone brighter, and the insects dispersed. Had he been a weakling, Vandar might have wept with relief at their departure. Instead, he spat their bitter taste out of his mouth, scooped up snow, and rubbed it on the burning, itching bumps where he'd been stung. Meanwhile, with a final beat of his wings, Jet settled on the ground.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner," Cera said, fumbling with the harness that secured her to the griffon's saddle.

"We flew down as soon as we noticed," the griffon rasped. Vandar had heard enough of Jet's inhuman speech to start to pick up emotion, and he wondered if the familiar had found the warriors' plight humorous. But no, surely not. The griffon was their totem, after all.

"If everyone will gather close," Cera said, swinging herself off Jet's back, "I'll ask Amaunator to ease your hurts."

She recited a prayer and swung her gilded mace in an arc above her head. The pain of Vandar's tiny wounds diminished, and other men sighed as they experienced the same relief. The lumps on their faces shrank.

"Is that better?" Cera asked.

Vandar nodded. "Much," he replied. Other berserkers grumbled the same and thanked her.

"Then explain what happened," the plump little priestess said.

"My guess," Vandar said, "is that we trespassed on territory that is protected by some spirit or fey."

"Because it's allied with the durthans?"

"Not necessarily. Not this far out from the fortress. I think it's likely the hill before us is a fey mound."

Other men muttered, and spat and sketched signs in the air to ward off bad luck.

"We scarcely have fey in Chessenta," Cera said, "at least outside the Sky Riders, but I take it you're talking about a burial mound? Sacred earth?"

"Yes," Vandar said. "They're generally marked, too, with rings of strangely colored mushrooms or stones laid out in patterns. But with all that buried under the snow ..." He shook his head in disgust. In large measure, it was disgust at himself.

A road led straight up the lakeshore from Immilmar almost to the Fortress of the Half-Demon. But if he and his brothers took it, everybody and his nanny goat would spot them on the march. The alternative was to swing well to the east,

thus avoiding both well-traveled paths and the forbidden reaches of the Urlingwood.

But that meant traversing country Vandar didn't know particularly well, certainly not well enough to have learned the location of every fey mound and other potential hazard. Still, it was hard to shake the feeling that he'd led his friends badly and they'd suffered as a result.

"What's wrong with you all?" asked Jet. "You look like frightened kittens. This isn't tricky. If it's not safe to go over the hill, go around it."

Vandar forced a smile. "That does sound like the answer, doesn't it? All right, brothers. It looks like the going might be easier on the right. Let's try that way."

They did, with Cera and Jet opting to hike along with them, and for a few paces, things were all right. Even after the healing prayer, Vandar's stings and bites still throbbed and itched a little, but it was a trivial discomfort.

Then, however, a space above his left eye started throbbing, too, and his joints ached. Queasiness churned his guts. Wondering if he was coming down with a winter fever, he heard retching behind him. He turned to see a fellow berserker doubled over, puking.

The other lodge brothers looked sick, too: pale, sweaty, and unsteady on their feet. Only Cera and Jet looked well, presumably because they hadn't set foot on the mound.

Her eyes narrowing, the sunlady peered at her comrades. "It can't be the venom," she murmured. "The healing neutralized that. It has to be a curse."

"A curse?" a warrior echoed, an edge of shrillness in his voice.

"Yes," Cera said, "but don't worry. The Keeper has granted me the power to lift curses before. Everybody, gather in again."

When they did, she recited another prayer. In fact, she recited it thrice. Each time, the sun shone brighter, and its warmth soaked into Vandar's body and made the aches and

nausea fade. But only for a heartbeat or two, after which the malaise returned as strong as ever. He looked around and could tell that it was the same for everyone.

Cera could tell, too. Brushing a blonde curl out of her eye, she said, "Let me meditate for a while. Then I'll try again."

"We need a real hathran," a warrior said.

"So we backtrack to Mulptan," said the fellow next to him. "Or better yet, Urling."

"No," Vandar said. "If we do that, news of our whereabouts could reach the Halruaans or the Shou. Besides, our allies are expecting us to join forces with them."

"But even berserkers can't fight sick," said the man who wanted to go to Urling. "Or at least, we won't fight and win."

"Here's what we'll do," rasped Jet, shaking out his wings with a snap. "Give Cera another chance to break the curse. If she can't, I'll fly to the top of the mound and make the fey or whatever it is release you. Or I'll kill it and see if that helps."

"No," Vandar said.

Jet's red eyes glared. "Don't you think I can do it?" he said.

"I think you might," Vandar said, "but only if you can find the fey. They're good at hiding, and at the moment, you don't have Aoth Fezim's eyes to look through."

"You have a point," Cera said, resting her hand on Jet's neck as though to calm him. "But do you have an alternative?"

"I hope so," Vandar said. "We Rashemi *know* the fey and spirits. We know how to make peace with them after we've given offense. So if you haven't broken the curse by moonrise, I'm the one who'll go to the top of the mound."

"Not by yourself," said Jet.

"Yes, and unarmed," Vandar replied. "We don't want to give the creature any reason to suspect that I might be trying to draw it out to attack it."

"You realize," Cera said, frowning, "that for all we know, the entity protecting the mound *has* thrown in with our

enemies. Or it could be dark fey, and so full of spite that nothing can placate it.”

Vandar shrugged. “I still think my way is best,” he said.

Jet snorted and turned away, seemingly abandoning the humans to their folly.

The griffon’s doubts actually mirrored Vandar’s own, and he prayed that Cera would be able to break the curse. But he was the master of the lodge, and if she couldn’t, it was his responsibility to set things right.

And though she tried until she had exhausted her ability to channel Amaunator’s might, she failed. Maybe, Vandar thought, the sun god was weak in a realm where neither he nor any masculine deity received much worship. Or perhaps he had trouble manifesting his power in the north in the dead of winter.

Or maybe the guardian of the mound was so formidable that even an accomplished cleric, fully initiated in the mysteries of her faith, was no match for it.

Whatever the problem was, it left Vandar with no recourse but to lay aside his javelin, broadsword, and dirk, and climb back up the slope when Selûne appeared, just as he’d said he would. By then, a catarrh had set in to augment the misery of his headache and cramping guts, and as he sang his song of appeasement, of praise and apology, he had to pause repeatedly to cough. Behind him, his friends were hacking and snuffling, too.

He could see nothing above him but gray, gleaming snow, trodden up to the point where he and his brothers had hiked before and unmarked beyond. He supposed that was better than if the insects had come buzzing forth again. Maybe their absence meant his hoarse, phlegmy song was actually doing some good.

Even when he clambered to the crest of the mound, the snowfall masked anything that might have warned a traveler that it was more than just a patch of high ground. After singing his song to the end one last time, Vandar shrugged

off his leather backpack, opened it, and brought out a straw-wrapped bottle of firewine and a little loaf of oat bread. He looked for someplace to set them up out of the snow and opted for the fork in the trunk of a black alder.

"It's good," murmured a cold, dry voice behind him, "that you at least know how to behave when someone forces you to do so."

Somehow Vandar managed to refrain from jumping and so revealing just how badly the voice had startled him. He took a breath, then turned around.

The entity before him was somewhat easier to make out than the flickering shapes he'd glimpsed when the insects were attacking, but not a great deal more so. It seemed composed of glimmer and shadow smudged together like a spoiled charcoal sketch. Vandar discerned long, slanted eyes under a high, broad forehead, something that might be embossed leather covering the apparition's lanky torso, and the implication of a knife hilt on its hip. But he had no idea whether the creature was a spirit of nature, a living fey protecting the resting place of its ancestors, or a ghost standing watching over its own remains. He only sensed that it was old and uncanny. It made the hair stand up on the back of his neck in a way even the undead durthans hadn't.

He bowed low. "I apologize for our rudeness before," he said. "My friends and I couldn't tell we were walking where we shouldn't have been."

"Why, I wonder," the being answered, "did the highest powers make mortals as they did, without eyes, wits, or memories, either? How can it be anything but mercy to send you into the dark whenever the opportunity presents itself?"

Vandar swallowed. "I can only tell you, my lord," he replied, "that our lives have value to us. Even we berserkers, who give up all thought of our own safety when we charge into battle, hope that our very recklessness will overwhelm our foes and bring us through alive."

“And where are you charging to now, in the middle of winter, across country most mortals have sense enough to avoid?”

“The Fortress of the Half-Demon,” Vandar said. He waited for a response, but none came. “Do you know it?”

“Not by that name,” the apparition said. “Perhaps by some older, truer name your kind has forgotten. But I know you, berserker. I know your mind. Those who garrison the stronghold have raided your squalid little settlement, and, full of wrath, you race to retaliate. Or else you are the marauders, thinking yourselves the cleverest folk who ever drew breath because you will fall on your foes in winter, when they won’t expect it. Either way, it’s all the same. Just ants snipping one another to pieces when their swarms come into contact.” The murky figure turned away.

Vandar hesitated. Though the guardian’s scorn rankled, a prudent man would leave it unanswered rather than risk annoying the creature any further, except that he didn’t know if the phantom had lifted the curse, or if it intended to. So far, he certainly didn’t feel any better. His head was still clogged, and his nose made a wet, rattling sound when he breathed.

“Wait,” he said.

The apparition pivoted and said, “Do you think it’s your place to give orders, to me, here, under Selûne’s mournful eye?”

“No,” Vandar said, “and I apologize again if it sounded that way. But you truly don’t understand. My friends and I aren’t chasing bandits, ice trolls, or any of the foes our fathers and grandfathers fought before us. There’s something new happening in Rashemen.”

The guardian chuckled. The sound of its mirth was clipped and hollow, like the notes a drummer played by striking wooden blocks. “Rest assured, little ant, it only seems new to you,” it said.

“Please, listen before you judge,” Vandar replied. “Before this, whatever human rulers came and went, in the truest sense, the fey and the spirits of the forests and hills controlled Rashemen. But if the folk in the Fortress of the Half-Demon have their way, the undead will set themselves above all the living, mortal and immortal alike.” It belatedly occurred to Vandar that if the entity before him was a ghost, that might not sound so bad to it. “And not even our own dead, at least not at the top. Dead things from some faraway place that no one has ever heard of!”

The apparition’s eyes narrowed. “Explain,” it said.

Vandar did his best and hoped the story made an impression. Since he could barely make out the guardian’s blurry features, it was difficult to judge.

All he knew was that when he had finished, and the phantom spoke again, its tone was as disdainful as before: “And you, blind man, trespasser, profaner, you are the champion who will defeat this threat?” it said.

“Not alone.” Vandar said before he had to stop to cough. “My lodge is marching with me, and the Stag King—do you know him? He is coming to join forces with us. The Iron Lord and the Wychlaran will help, too, if we ask.”

“But you haven’t,” the guardian said, “because you want the griffons for yourselves. To make your little lodge more prestigious than any other. Perhaps even to make its chieftain the Iron Lord when the throne becomes vacant again.”

Vandar felt a twinge of discomfort different from the uneasiness that came from simply being in the phantom’s presence. For the first time, and to his own surprise, he wondered if his ambitions were somehow tainted and unworthy.

But how could they be, when they were simply what every proper Rashemi man wanted? What older warriors *taught* him to want, especially if he hailed from a family of no

particular prosperity or distinction? He tried to scowl the crazy feeling away.

“My lord, I don’t deny that I hope that, by serving the realm, I can also do well for my lodge and for myself,” Vandar said. “That’s how mortal men think. If the stories I’ve heard all my life are true, it’s how fey and spirits think, too. But it isn’t *just* ambition or greed that draws me to the griffons. From the moment Yhelbruna called them down from the sky, I felt connected to them, like the spirits meant for me to have them. You have magic. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

To his surprise, the sentinel chuckled again, and the sound was arguably less cold and dismissive than before. “If I saw everything that’s hidden,” it said, “I wouldn’t need you to tell me about revenants coming here from a distant land, would I? I will say this: It speaks well of you that you answered honestly. And it might indeed be unfortunate if the dead claimed dominion over Rashemen.”

“Well, yes, plainly,” replied Vandar.

The murky figure shook its head and said, “So declares the ant, imagining it’s surveying all the wide world from the top of a blade of grass. But you don’t see what I do. If a vampire clan keeps a herd of human cattle somewhere else—in the land you call Thay, for example—you and I have no practical reason to care. But this country has always been unique, and even after the death of the Lady of the Seven Stars, it remains so. This is still where the fey worlds and the mortal sphere interpenetrate more closely than anyplace else, and if your undead intruders take it for their own, their victory may strike echoes and reflections. That may even be why they came here, although I doubt they possess such depth of comprehension.”

Vandar smiled a crooked smile. “You’re right,” he said. “The ant doesn’t understand, or at least, not much. But I take it you agree that my friends and I are doing something worthwhile. That being so, will you help us?”

“I’ll call back my anger, certainly,” said the apparition.

Vandar hacked for so long and hard that he felt like he might pass out for lack of breath. But when the fit ended, his head and chest felt clear, as though he'd expelled every particle of phlegm. And nothing ached anymore.

"Thank you," Vandar said. He hesitated, and then, impatient with his own caution, pushed onward. "Truly. But is that it? All you did is cure the sickness you gave us yourself."

The phantom smiled. Or perhaps it was simply a trick of the light, as a wisp of cloud drifted past the moon.

"Did I find something to like about your kind once, for a moment or two in the morning of the world?" it said. "Perhaps ... and it may be more than chance that led you here to disturb my rest. Even more unlikely things have happened, I suppose. But I'm not like your Stag King. I no longer march to war. My own vows would scrape me to nothing if I tried. But that means I no longer need what I once carried to war."

The apparition waved its hand. Something rumbled, and a patch of snow collapsed in on itself. Or rather, Vandar realized, peering, it was falling into a hole like a deep and irregular grave that had opened beneath it.

"Climb down," the phantom said.

Wonderful, Vandar thought. According to every word on the subject he'd ever heard, simply treading on a fey mound was dangerous. Entering one was a hundred times more so. Still, the phantom itself had opened the way, and if it meant to do him further harm, it scarcely needed to be tricky about it. It already had him at its mercy.

Besides, what sort of berserker, let alone a berserker chieftain, refused a dare?

Clinging to pieces of the frozen earth, Vandar clambered downward, and shadow swallowed him. The only remaining light came from the stars directly overhead and their gleam on the snow below. That was why it wasn't until he reached

the bottom that he realized the starlight was glinting on more than snow.

Once, he thought, a body might have rested in the hole. But if so, time had obliterated every trace of bone, flesh, hair, or clothing, or at least every one he might otherwise have noticed in the dark. But, not corroded, tarnished, or even dirty, were a long spear and broadsword that remained. They appeared to be made entirely of some strange crimson metal, even the shaft of the spear.

The sword's scabbard had fasteners to clip it on his hip. The spear was more awkward to manage, but by running it down his back and through his belt, he managed to carry both weapons up out of the hole.

"What do you think?" asked the apparition, irony keen as any blade in its voice. "Are the arms worthy of an Iron Lord in waiting?"

Making sure not to point it at the phantom, Vandar lowered the spear into a guard position. Though he was far more proficient with a sword, even he could feel how light and perfectly balanced the weapon was. It seemed awake and eager in his hands, an instrument capable of killing even dragons and demons as required.

"I'm no Old One," he said, "but even I can feel these are full of magic. What do they do?"

"I can't tell you that," the guardian said, "because the weapons behave differently in every set of hands. They magnify what you already are. Knowing that, do you still want them?"

"Of course!" Vandar exclaimed. "Except for a place in my lodge—and the griffons—I've never wanted anything more." He bowed as deeply as he was able. "And I thank you with all my heart."

"As well you should," replied the phantom. "And now you have everything I had to give. Well, except advice. I told you I don't see everything. No one does, not the wisest prophet

in the bright world or the cleverest seer in the dark one. But now that I'm taking an interest, I see something."

Vandar had grown at least a little accustomed to the spectral presence of the guardian, but suddenly his mouth went dry all over again. "What do you see?" he asked.

"I see treachery and murder flying down from the sky. I see that you shouldn't trust the outlanders."

Vandar opened his mouth to ask for more, but before he could, the guardian vanished. The gap in the earth closed at the same instant, just as swiftly, silently, and completely. If not for the spear in his hand and the weight of the blade hanging on his hip, he might almost have wondered if the conversation had only been a dream.

His feelings were mixed as he strode back down the mound. Naturally, a part of him was jubilant. There would have been cause for joy if the guardian had simply lifted the curse, but it had done much more. It had given him enchanted fey weapons and as much as prophesied that he would win the griffons and rise to be a great man in the days to come. And when his brothers spotted him descending and started cheering, their vigor restored, it made the moment even sweeter.

Yet even so, when his own gaze fell on Cera and Jet, he felt a pang of disquiet.

It wasn't difficult to believe that Aoth and Jhesrhi might ultimately play him false. Fighting for coin instead of kin or hearth, sellswords were little better than bandits, and dishonorable by definition. In addition to which, the war mage plainly thought himself above everyone else—why else did he constantly try to order others around? The tall, slender elemental was as cold a woman as Vandar had ever met, even if she did have fire running in her veins.

But Cera was the servant of a god, and he liked her friendly conversation, saucy jokes, and general good cheer, as well as her willingness to take a turn at performing the various chores camp life required. She made a striking

contrast to Yhelbruna's grim taciturnity on the trek into the High Country. And Jet was the living emblem of courage and fidelity as the Griffon Lodge defined them.

Still, the griffon was also a winged war steed, and when his Thayan master commanded it, he could plunge down from on high and kill a man like a falcon killing a rabbit.

I'll watch them, Vandar resolved. I'll watch and see what happens.

* * * * *

Mario Bez looked on as two of his crew examined the weathered menhir by the silvery glow of conjured phosphorescent orbs. One of his experts—to give them more credit than was probably their due—was a tubby-horned runt of a tiefling warlock who claimed considerable knowledge of the denizens of the lower worlds. The other, in spiked gauntlets and a red-trimmed jupon, was a human priestess of Tempus the Foehammer. In theory, she would provide the insights of an exponent of divine magic, as opposed to the arcane variety that the tiefling, Bez himself, and a dozen others aboard the *Storm of Vengeance* practiced.

It was a cold night, with a frigid wind whistling down from the higher peaks, and Bez's scholars had been at their task for a while. The skyship was presently anchored on a broad ledge on the mountainside above the standing stone, and those of the mining village far below it. The lights burning aboard her taunted a shivering son of the Shining South with the possibility of warmth. Still, nipping at a flask of Sembian brandy, Bez managed to curb the impulse to urge his subordinates to hurry. Nothing good could come of that. Instead, he comforted himself with the reflection that at least the stone wouldn't suddenly run away and hide.

Olthe, the Foehammer's battleguard, stepped back from the monument. She was as big and as broad-shouldered as

many a fighting man, and could swing a battle-axe to as deadly an effect when she channeled the war god's power. Or she could just grab a man and break his back over her knee, as Bez had witnessed in several camp fights and tavern brawls.

Presumably she'd completed her investigations, so he tossed her the flask. "What have you learned?" he asked.

"The trap has two fiends inside it," she replied. Her alto voice was melodious and cultured, a perennial surprise issuing from her lumpish face and brutish frame.

"I believe there might even be three," said Melemer the tiefling, his yellow eyes slightly chatoyant in the starlight.

Olthe glared. "You're wrong," she said.

Melemer spread his hands. "Of course, battleguard," he replied. "If you're certain of your estimate, then be assured, I'm certain of it, too." In combat, he was as brave as any mercenary Bez had ever known, but away from the battlefield, it was always his way to apologize, flatter, and defer ... at least until the person who'd offended him dropped his guard.

"It doesn't much matter if it's two or three," Bez said, "as long as they aren't too powerful. What can you tell me about that?"

"I think we're all right," Olthe said. She glowered again at Melemer, like she was daring him to contradict her.

But she'd already lost Bez's attention. He pivoted and peered up the slope at the murky, faceless figure approaching in a silent, flowing way that somehow looked like creeping and bounding at the same time. Melemer raised his hands, and his several rings, each made of a different metal and engraved with a different glyph, shone like his eyes.

Bez whipped out his dagger and rapier and came on guard. Lightning crawled and crackled in the smaller blade, and frost formed on the larger.

Olthe spun her axe through cuts, blocks, and flourishes and chanted a battle hymn. Though she wasn't directing the challenge at him, Bez still felt the words ring and reverberate inside him.

The shadow didn't seem daunted by the prayer or anyone else's demonstration of power. It kept coming, only halting when light rippled inside it, and its vague, flat form swelled into something constant and three-dimensional.

The transformation only took a heartbeat or two, and when it was finished, Dai Shan bowed with an elegance that somehow conveyed both impeccable courtesy and nonchalance. "My valiant associates," he said.

"What in the Destroyer's name are you doing here?" Bez demanded.

"I wanted to confer with you," Dai Shan said, "so I sent one of my servants to find you. When I sensed that it had, I inhabited it, turning it into a window through which you and I can speak for the relatively brief time the magic will last."

Bez quelled the murderous forces seething inside his weapons and lowered them to point at the ground. But at that moment, a cordial greeting was beyond him. Maybe it was because, though they'd scoured the country from Immilmar east to the mountains, he and his company hadn't found a trace of any of the sundry bands of undead witches, werewolves, and what-have-yous that were supposedly wandering around committing atrocities. Whereas it seemed the Shou only had to dispatch one lone phantom to locate a flying vessel with minimal difficulty. In a better mood, Bez might have found some humor in that, but for the moment, it aggravated his frustration.

And perhaps that was why he examined the merchant's words in his mind, and, began to doubt. "Immilmar is west," he said, and, responding to his suspicion and hostility, the potential for more lightning and searing, heart-stopping chill quivered inside his blades. "Your ghost, or whatever it was, slunk down from the east."

Dai Shan's slight smile didn't waver. "Naturally, the shadow couldn't just travel to you in a straight line," he said. "It had to wander back and forth before spotting you at last."

"When I said it was coming down from the east," Bez persisted, "I meant, sneaking down from the spot where the *Storm* is moored. We've been carrying a stowaway ever since we left Immilmar, haven't we? One emplaced to spy on us or worse." He raised the rapier and dagger, and his silent command made their magic flare anew. Taking their cue from him, Olthe and Melemer dropped back into fighting stances.

Dai Shan took a nonchalant step back.

"I implore you," he said, "consider that I'm not really here. If you destroy this thing, all you'll do is bring our parley to a fruitless and premature end."

Bez sneered. "And why, merchant, would I want to talk to a false friend who snuck a horror aboard my ship?"

Dai Shan's smile widened just a bit. "Stalwart captain, had you not opted to make yourself the foremost soldier of the age, I'm confident you would have won equal distinction as a poet or a player, for you unquestionably have the requisite flair for the dramatic. Things that rise from shadow have their appetites, and I won't insult your intelligence by suggesting otherwise. But I never let this one slip the leash, and even if I had, how could one little phantom truly threaten a warrior who's fought giants and malebranches in his time?"

Bez smiled a grudging smile. "It always feels strange to talk to you, Shou. I think it's because I'm used to being the glib one. Do you swear the shadow was only aboard to spy and give you and me a way to talk if need be? You didn't plan anything worse?"

"August warlord, in my father's sight, I swear it," Dai Shan replied. "May I also point out that, if my poor intermediary's

presence on your vessel was inappropriate, at least you're rid of it now. It won't survive to board a second time."

Bez extinguished the power burning in his weapons and slid them back into their sheaths. "All right. Forget it for now, if only because you're right. I can't thrust a sword into the real Dai Shan across the length of this wretched country. So what do you want, anyway?"

"I want you to return to Immilmar to pick me up."

"Why?"

"Well, that's the part that's slightly awkward. I'll explain when my true self is aboard the skyship. Until then, I'm asking you to trust me."

Bez snorted. "No offense, merchant, but that's not going to happen. I offered to work *with* you, not blindly carry out your commands."

"But, stalwart and sagacious captain, surely you see that the real problem is *my* inability to repose complete and utter faith in *you*. If I told you now where you ought to sail and why, perhaps you would simply do so immediately without bothering to collect me. And then how could I convince the hathrans that I played even a minor part in the achievements that will follow?"

Bez grunted. "I'll think about it," he said.

Dai Shan frowned ever so slightly. It was about as much of a display of sincere emotion as he ever permitted himself. In its way, his face was as much of a mask as any the witches wore.

"Obviously," the little Shou said, "I understand why such a shrewd leader of men prefers to weigh his decisions carefully. But if we lose our means of communication before you say yes or no, that will leave me in an awkward and ambiguous position."

Bez sneered. "That's your problem," he said.

"Indeed it would be. As your problem is chasing a quarry you haven't caught and will never catch without my

guidance. Clearly, you realize it, too, or you wouldn't be meddling with a demon trap in the middle of a frigid night."

"We're looking for clues that will lead us to the enemy."

"Master strategist, wily tactician, scourge of the Dragon Coast, I have the utmost respect for your intelligence. I ask you to respect mine as well. Plainly, you paid attention to the tales of the durthans and their ilk breaking open the old Raumathari menhirs. Frustrated by your inability to locate the actual foe, you've decided to open a stone yourself, kill whatever's inside, and carry the carcass back to Immilmar as a trophy."

"Just for amusement's sake, let's say you're right. What of it?"

"If I may be forthright, it's a weak ploy. It may slightly elevate Yhelbruna's opinion of you, but it won't convince her you've made any fundamental progress toward accomplishing the task she set us. Whereas if you honor my request—"

"All right!" Bez snapped. "I'll come for you. And if it turns out you're wasting my time, well, you'll be in reach of my blades then, won't you?"

"Indeed," Dai Shan said. "Until I see you next." He bowed deeply, and his body broke apart and disappeared, like it was crumbling into a dust so fine the eye couldn't see it.

After a moment, Melemer chuckled. "I like that one," he said.

Bez grinned. "You would," he replied. "You both have weasel blood flowing in your veins. But don't get too attached to him."

"So," Olthe said, nodding toward the monument. "We're giving up on this?"

"No," said Bez. "We're already here. And whether the idea's a 'weak ploy' or not, I don't feel like going back to the Iron Lord and the Wychlaran empty-handed."

"Fair enough," the priestess said, frowning. "The only problem I see is that while we don't know if those miners

down there have noticed any undead lurking about, someone probably has noticed the *Storm* sitting on the mountainside. What if the villagers figure out that we freed the demons ourselves? What if they send word to the Iron Lord? I admit, it's unlikely—"

"More than unlikely," said Bez, "impossible. The fiends are going to prove just what a terrible threat they are by wiping out the village. Well, technically, we're going to do it for them, but I'm sure that if they knew, they'd appreciate our efforts on their behalf. Then, after we finish the miners, we'll crack open the trap, kill its prisoners, and take their heads."

N I N E

A griffon is about to fly down among us!" Aoth shouted in Elvish. "Don't shoot at him! He's Jet, my steed that I told you about!"

Everyone stood and waited for the creature to appear, and shortly thereafter, Aoth pointed with his spear and said, "There." Then an enormous shadow swept over the snowy ground.

Jet swooped to the ground. Heeding Aoth's warning, no one attacked the griffon. But some of the stag warriors couldn't resist the impulse to raise their weapons.

Jet looked them over and snorted. "Relax," he rasped, "I'm not going to hurt you. Now, if you were centaurs ... or maybe not. I've seen things lately that put me off horseflesh."

"So you told me," Aoth said. He advanced, scratched among the feathers atop the griffon's head, then lifted Cera out of the saddle and gave her a hug.

The Stag King strode up to them, and to Jet, with no apparent hesitation. Either he was confident the griffon wouldn't lash out at him, or he was simply unwilling to act timidly.

"Highness," said Aoth, "this is Cera Eurthos, sunlady of Soolabax, and Jet, my familiar. Cera, Jet, this is the Stag King."

Smiling, Cera moved her hand in an arc, and for a moment, the pale winter sunlight shone brighter and felt

warmer. "Hello," she said. "The Keeper's blessing on you and all your company."

The Stag King grunted. "Your god doesn't love me, cleric, nor I, him," he said. "How near are these berserkers of yours?"

Cera blinked. "You should meet up well before dusk," she said.

"Then let's pick up the pace," the spirit said, "and find out what this army of ours looks like when we put it all together." Turning away, he swung his antler weapon over his head to urge the company onward.

"Well," the priestess said. "That was a gracious welcome."

"Even though he hails from the Feywild rather than the Shadowfell," Aoth replied, "he's a dark thing, like the fomorians, and perhaps not partial to clerics of the light."

Aoth, Cera, Jhesrhi, and Jet started forward amid the stag men, most of whom were still keeping a cautious eye on the griffon and making sure they didn't get too close.

"But enough about him," Aoth said. "By the Pure Flame, it's good to see you again! Both of you! What's your impression of the Griffon Lodge? How's their morale?"

"Oh, *that's* no problem," said Jet, a sardonic note in his voice.

"Meaning what?" Aoth replied.

"Jet said he told you about the fey mound," Cera said.

"Yes," said Aoth. "It's a miracle that any traveler ever gets anywhere in Rashemen, considering that you have to change direction or stop to make an offering to a spirit twenty times a day. But my understanding was that Vandar *did* mollify the guardian, and it lifted the curse."

"It did," Cera said, "but then something else started to happen. Gradually, so Jet and I didn't notice at first. That's why you're only hearing about it now." Keeping her voice low, she explained what she meant.

When she finished, Aoth said, "I hate this stinking country."

* * * * *

Like Mangan Uruk's castle, the Fortress of the Half-Demon was built of gray stone and black iron, but it had an even more massive and squared-off look to it. Apparently the round towers and turrets that graced the stronghold in Immilmar were a Rashemi innovation.

The ancient Nars, however, had adorned—if that was the right word—the citadel with a huge iron gate cast in the form of a snarling inhuman face. At some point in the centuries that followed, the leaf on the right side had fallen from its hinges. That left only one profile of the ghastly countenance standing, and, Aoth assumed, inspired the name the place had borne ever since.

Lying prone to peer over a rise, he shifted his gaze from the gate to the battlements. Someone or something was moving around up there, but Aoth was so far away that even his eyes were having trouble discerning what. Hoping it would help, he touched a tattoo that sent a bracing thrill of vigor through his body. He squinted, too, and the tiny figures came into focus.

One was a squat little goblin spearman with greenish skin, pointed ears, and a shaggy mane of hair sticking out in all directions from under his conical helmet. The other was considerably larger. Indeed, if the stooped thing stood up straight, it might be taller than the Stag King. Judging from its long arms, spindly frame, and warty carrot of a nose, it was likely a troll, although its white, glistening skin distinguished it from any such creature Aoth had encountered farther south. So did its mail, crossbow, and falchion.

The trolls of his experience were scarcely more intelligent than beasts. They lived like beasts in the wild, and even when some enterprising commander managed to tame one and use it as a soldier, it was rarely given weapons or armor. There was no point. In the excitement of battle, a troll would

almost always strip away the gear and assail the foe with fang and claw.

The white trolls of the North Country were evidently different. But not, Aoth suspected, so different as to pose an insurmountable problem. He was more concerned about reanimated durthans and other undead, but there were none in view for the scouting.

Of course, that only made sense. Even undead who could tolerate sunlight didn't like it. So why would they man the battlements by day when their living allies—creatures who'd thrown in with the durthans during the Witch War and had rallied to their cause again—could do it for them?

When he judged that he'd seen all he was going to, Aoth crawled backward far enough so that no one on the battlements would see him when he stood up. He tramped back to the relatively clear patch of rolling heath where his allies waited and was pleased to find that, though the berserkers and the stag men didn't show any signs of having become fast friends in his absence, the two groups at least appeared to be tolerating one another. Perhaps they found each other so strange that their first impulse was to marvel rather than feel fear or revulsion.

Vandar was sitting on a stump with a number of his lodge brothers gathered around him. When he spotted Aoth returning, he beckoned to him with a flick of his new spear. To fire-kissed eyes, the red metal gleamed with something more than reflected sunlight; Aoth could see the enchantments flowing and seething inside it.

That didn't make it any less annoying to be summoned like a subordinate. Still, it seemed too petty a matter to complain about, and Vandar's current location was as good a spot for a parley as any. Aoth headed for it as requested. He just made sure he didn't hurry.

"What did you find out?" Vandar asked.

Aoth glanced around and found that, as expected, the Stag King, Cera, Jhesrhi, Jet, and Zyl had begun converging

on their location. "Let's wait until everyone can hear. Then I'll only have to tell it once."

Vandar scowled. "As you wish," he said. He sounded like he was doing Aoth a favor.

Cera and Jet were right, Aoth thought. Vandar was different. He'd thought that at least a grudging trace of camaraderie had grown up between the berserker and himself, but if so, there was no sign of it. Instead, Vandar seemed even testier and more suspicious than on the occasion of their first meeting.

Were the red sword and spear exerting a psychic influence? Aoth had never borne such weapons and wouldn't want to, but he'd heard stories about them.

If the weapons were to blame, Aoth supposed he might as well get used to the new Vandar. For it was plain that he prized the enchanted arms too highly to ever give them up.

Once all the leaders of the expedition had gathered around, and many of the berserkers, too, Aoth proceeded to tell them what he'd observed. When he reached the part about the big white creature on the battlements, Vandar grinned and said, "That was an ice troll. Fighting them is one way we Rashemi keep in practice for killing Thayans."

The berserker's lodge brothers laughed.

Aoth swallowed a pang of irritation. "I'm glad you recognize it," he said. "You can tell me and the other southerners about them later. For now, let's talk about our next move."

"Isn't it obvious?" Vandar asked. "You say the gate is open. The sun is shining, so the undead are at their weakest. Let's go take the castle!"

His lodge brothers clamored in agreement. Some screeched in a fair imitation of griffons and swept out their arms like they were spreading a pair of wings. Startled by the outburst, the stag warriors stepped back from it and some even leveled their spears. Fortunately, though, they

weren't rattled enough to actually strike out at their human allies.

When the uproar had died down, Aoth said, "You have to remember, the enemy aren't idiots. Since they can't close the gate, they've protected it some other way."

"How?" Vandar asked.

"I don't know yet."

" 'Yet?' "

"I need to get closer and look at the castle from different angles. Jet and I should fly over under cover of darkness."

"That's stupid. The undead will be out, and they can see in the dark. Come to think of it, so can trolls and goblins."

Aoth smiled. "But they can't see as far in it as I can," he said. "Jet and I will be all right, and afterward, we'll all have a better idea of what we're facing."

Vandar shook his head. "I don't like it," he said.

"Why not?"

"The durthans surely send out patrols, including undead patrols by night. The longer we delay attacking, the more likely it is that they'll notice we're here. Then we lose the advantage of surprise."

His followers growled their agreement.

"We're still a way from the fortress," said Aoth. "We can stay hidden for a little while."

"If you humans stop screaming," rasped Jet, "that will help."

The berserkers looked somewhat nonplussed that their own totem had rebuked them. Or some of them did. Vandar appeared unfazed.

"I still say we should go now," he said.

And how many strongholds have you taken over the course of *your* military career? Aoth wondered sourly. Aloud, he said, "Understand, there's some cover on the approach to the gate. But even so, the guards will see you long before you reach the castle."

Vandar grinned. "Then we'll run fast," he said.

Aoth turned and looked up at the Stag King. “What do you think, Highness?” he asked.

The fey lord frowned and fingered his chin. “I think that boldness often carries the day,” he said at length. “But it’s more likely to do so when combined with knowledge of the foe’s capabilities.”

That wiped the smirk off Vandar’s square-jawed face. For though he might despise Thayans, he’d been taught his whole life to respect spirits and the fey. Aoth felt a flicker of hope that the Rashemi would give way.

Vandar stood up. He still had to look up at the hulking figure before him, but it put them more eye to eye.

“Highness,” he said, “I know you’re old and wise. But you’re not the only one who is. A similarly impressive spirit prophesied that I’m going to lead my brothers to victory. As a token, it gave me this”—he hefted the red spear—“and this.” He gripped the hilt of the scarlet sword.

Aoth wondered if the guardian of the mound truly had said precisely that. Since no one else had heard the conversation, there was no way to know. But somehow, he doubted it.

Judging from his crooked smile, maybe the Stag King did, too. But all he said was, “Take it from one who knows: Even wise old spirits don’t see everything. Or necessarily speak the *whole* truth in a form the hearer understands.”

Vandar frowned. “But there was nothing confusing about this,” he said. “And so, Highness, with all respect, I tell you that my brothers and I are going to go take that castle. I’ll be honored if you and your warriors fight alongside us. But if not, we’ll manage on our own.”

The spirit snorted. “No need for that, mortal,” he said. “We came to fight, and we will.”

At that, the berserkers couldn’t resist the impulse to howl and flap their arms some more. Some even pummeled one another, or gashed their cheeks with knives. Infected rather than alarmed by the excitement, stag warriors brandished

their weapons, nodded vigorously, and set the bells in their antlers chiming. Meanwhile, Aoth exchanged glances with his fellow outlanders.

Cera looked worried, and Jhesrhi and Jet plainly shared Aoth's disgust. *You handled that well*, the griffon said.

If you could have done better, Aoth replied, *that was the time to show it. Because the fact of the matter is, I'm not the commander of this force, and neither the Stag King nor Vandar is much inclined to defer to my opinion anytime it differs from his own.*

Yet when the commotion had died down and everyone had started preparing to march on the citadel, he approached the Stag King anyway.

"You didn't warn me you were bringing me such a reckless ally," the spirit said.

"He's even more headstrong now than when I first met him," Aoth replied. "But I wouldn't say you tried all that hard to talk him out of his plan. If it even deserves to be called a plan."

"You heard him," the Stag King said. "He was going to do what he wanted no matter what anyone said, even me or a talking griffon. Do you think we should let him and his comrades go assault the castle by themselves?"

"No," Aoth replied. He had needed an army, and he had one. He couldn't let it come apart to be slaughtered piecemeal. "We'll just have to be as cunning as he is foolhardy and find a way to make this work."

* * * * *

Jhesrhi stood and crooned a whisper to the cold, strong winds of the North Country. She'd made friends with them during the trek from the Erech Forest, and they were happy to gather close and toy with strands of her hair and the folds of her war cloak. Curious about the heat they sensed inside her, they nosed at her like hounds.

When they understood what Jhesrhi wanted of them, all but one rushed away with a howl. The berserkers exclaimed and flinched at the blast. The stag men shook their bells, expressing surprise or approval in their own way.

The remaining wind settled awkwardly on the ground; staying still was unnatural and uncomfortable for it. "Soon," Jhesrhi said, reassuring it, "soon, you'll fly again." She visualized the shape she wanted for it, and, sketching the broad outline with sweeps of her staff, helped the elemental congeal into that guise. The onlookers babbled, rang their bells, and stepped back as, over the course of the several heartbeats, a hawk as big as Jet materialized before them.

"Are you done?" asked Aoth.

The winds had left Jhesrhi's hair hanging in her face, and she brushed it back. "Yes," she replied.

"Wonderful," Jet rasped. "I needed a crosswind to fight."

"It will help keep arrows out of your belly," said Aoth. He turned to Vandar and the Stag King. "You might as well move out. The rest of us will see you on the battlefield."

"I trust so," Vandar said. He brandished the red spear over his head. "Come on, brothers!" He strode off in the same direction the wind was blowing, lashing bare branches and picking up loose snow. The other berserkers followed. The Stag King gave Aoth a crooked smile, then set his own warriors into motion with a more casual wave of his antler weapon.

They were all standing tall, but they'd crouch down and take advantage of cover when they neared the fortress. If Tymora smiled, the cover, the frigid, stinging gale blowing in the guards' faces, and the diversion Aoth intended to provide should keep them from being spotted until they were close to the gate. When the sentries did catch sight of them, it would be time to charge.

For the moment, because winged steeds traveled faster than folk on foot, there was nothing for Jhesrhi and the others who had stayed behind to do but watch the advance.

After a while, Aoth growled, "May the Black Flame burn him."

"What's wrong?" Cera asked, her golden buckler on her arm and her gilded mace in hand. Her yellow vestments fluttered in the wind.

"You can't see it?" he said. "The Stag King and his warriors have slowed down a little and put the berserkers in the lead. He's making sure that when arrows and javelins start raining down from the battlements, and when our side stumbles into whatever's on the other side of the gate, Vandar and his comrades will bear the brunt of it."

With a snap and a rustle, Jet shook out his wings. "So what?" the griffon said. "You'd do the same to protect the Brotherhood if some other captain was determined to rush into trouble."

Aoth snorted as he said, "Well, maybe."

"I think," Cera said, "that you just don't like it that you're not in command."

"There's that priestly wisdom people talk about," he said.

She frowned. "I wasn't criticizing you, jackass," she retorted.

"I know," Aoth replied. "I'm sorry. And you may be right. Of course, I wasn't in *complete* control of the situation when I served Shala, or Tchazzar, or, come to think of it, any of my employers. A hired sword never is. But still. I can't read the Stag King. I'm not sure I understand why he's even here. I can't talk sense to these idiot berserkers, and we're all rushing in blindly where a little scouting ..." He spat. "Forget it. I'm blathering. We'll cope like we always do. Mount up."

Aoth swung himself onto Jet's back, and Cera climbed up behind him. Responding to the war mage's unspoken command, straps reared from the saddle like serpents to buckle him and the priestess in.

Jhesrhi climbed onto her conjured hawk. It didn't have any tack, but she trusted her skill and the elemental's to keep her astride it.

“Ready?” asked Aoth.

She nodded and said, “Go.”

Jet trotted, lashed his wings, and carried Aoth and Cera into the air. The hawk followed. For a moment, bits of its feathers rippled and faded. Jhesrhi murmured to it, reminding it of the need to remain solid, and the erosion stopped.

When they had climbed high enough, she spotted the berserkers and the stag men on the ground. Evidently satisfied with their progress, Aoth wheeled Jet away from them, and once again, she followed.

Their allies were advancing on the fortress from the east. To create a maximally effective distraction, the flyers should arguably have swept in from the opposite direction, across the gleaming frozen surface of Lake Ashane. But that would have required the griffon and the hawk to beat their way into the teeth of the windstorm Jhesrhi had raised, so they were approaching from the south instead.

From the outside, the design of the fortress was simple. The walls made a square, and a great slab of a keep loomed opposite the broken gate. As Aoth had reported, there were guards walking the battlements, and more on the roof of the donjon. There were not many yet, but Jhesrhi assumed more would scramble out into the open when she and her comrades made their presence known.

Flying a little ahead of her, Aoth leveled his spear. A booming, twisting flare of lighting leaped from the point.

The thunderbolt blasted away a merlon and the ice troll behind it. Burning, the creature toppled backward out of sight.

Jhesrhi aimed her brazen staff and recited a rhyme. A red spark shot from the end toward two goblins standing together on the battlements. When it reached them, it exploded into a burst of flame that tore the creatures apart. In other circumstances, she might have deemed the spell more powerful than required, and thus a waste of her

strength. But she and her comrades wanted to create the impression of a terrifying onslaught.

An ice troll discharged its crossbow. Jet dipped one wing, raised the other, and dodged the bolt. Cera brandished her mace, and a shaft of light blazed from the end of it. The magic burned all the way through the troll's torso, and it staggered but didn't fall down. Instead, snarling and baring a mouthful of tangled yellow fangs, it snatched another quarrel from its quiver.

Jet hurtled past the troll as it tried to reload, and it pivoted to keep the griffon in view. Jhesrhi flourished her staff, and arrows of flame appeared in midtrajectory, streaking at the creature and splashing against its back. From the way it roared and flailed, she'd hurt it, but it still wouldn't go down.

Then she and the hawk shot over its head, and she had her first glimpse down into the castle courtyard. As she'd expected, there were more of the undead's living allies on the ground. From the looks of it, a moment ago they'd been pursuing the mundane business of fortress life, practicing their combat techniques, mending gear, tending animals, or just lounging about. But the attack from the air had captured everyone's attention. The trolls and goblins were either gaping in surprise or scurrying to aid in the defense.

Jhesrhi had time to rain fire down on a trio of bugbears. Then the hawk whizzed over the north wall, carrying her beyond the confines of the fortress. Her steed swung back and forth, dodging the quarrels that flew after it, and, clinging to its body with her knees, she twisted around and hurled darts of flame at the shooters. But the hawk's evasive maneuvers threw off her own aim, and the missiles only struck the gray stone wall beneath their feet.

The hawk wheeled for a second pass, and Jet did, too, wobbling in flight as he shook an arrow out of the plumage on his left wing. It looked to Jhesrhi as if the shaft had only pierced feathers, not flesh. There wasn't any blood that she could see.

Aoth shot Jhesrhi a grin across the air that separated their two mounts. In contrast, Cera looked grim, not scared but rather intent on the business at hand. For an instant, the sunlady's expression reminded Jhesrhi of her own early days with the Brotherhood, when she'd felt a desperate need to prove her worth and not let Aoth and Khouryn down.

They all raced at the castle again, and into a flight of arrows and quarrels. Despite Jet's skill at evasion, Aoth had to block one with his targe, and Jhesrhi had to cry out to the wind. It gusted and tumbled away two shafts that would otherwise have struck the hawk.

Once they had weathered that volley, Aoth, trying to keep the nearest archers from shooting again, shrouded the section of wall on which they were standing in a smear of noxious vapor. A goblin, overcome with sickness or just panicking, reeled out over the edge and fell down the outside of the wall.

Jhesrhi hurled flame at another group of bowmen, but as they neared the fortress again, she concerned herself with spotting spellcasters. They posed an even greater danger.

There! Two masked, hooded witches had emerged onto the battlements from the tower at a corner where two walls met. One, clad in black and green, smoked as the undead flesh inside her layers of cloak and robe fried despite the protection they afforded.

Jhesrhi pointed her staff and willed a burst of fire to engulf the durthans, but when it came, the flash was a feeble flicker that didn't even stagger them, let alone tear them apart or set them ablaze. Some protective charm had leeched the force from the magic.

The smoking witch chanted in one of the tongues of Sky Home. The hawk lurched as an enchantment hammered at its mind, trying to smash its way in and take control. Alarmed, Jhesrhi rattled off words of power to help the bird resist.

They were working, too. She could feel it. But meanwhile, the hawk, no longer entirely in control of its own body, floundered spastically in flight—an easy mark when the archers and crossbowmen targeted it again. And the second witch, a lopsided figure cloaked in mold-spotted gray, aimed a long wooden wand at Jhesrhi.

Cera shouted, “Keeper!” from somewhere off to the right. The sunlight around the durthans brightened, and they screamed and staggered. The psychic assault on the hawk ended, and its wings beat powerfully and smoothly once again.

It no longer needed Jhesrhi’s counterspell, and since she was already speaking the language of the wind, she hoped she could adapt the magic to another purpose quickly, before Cera’s holy light faded. She rattled off a word of power, and a screaming blast of air tore the hoods off the witches’ heads and pulled their mantles streaming back from their shoulders, exposing more of what was inside to Amaunator’s power.

Both durthans burst into flame. The one in gray stumbled back into the tower. Her comrade collapsed and burned on the wall-walk. Jhesrhi felt a surge of vicious satisfaction.

After that, she had time to hurl one more blast of fire down into the courtyard. Then the hawk carried her beyond the castle walls. Arrows, quarrels, and a jagged streamer of darkness leaped after them, but none hit the mark.

As her steed wheeled, she was happy to see that Aoth, Jet, and Cera all still appeared unscathed as well. The Luckmaiden was with them, at least so far.

“Once more should do it!” Aoth called.

Jhesrhi glanced south and saw that he was right. Keeping low, the berserkers and stag warriors had crept almost close enough to the castle to charge. And there was no indication that any of the distracted creatures on the battlements had seen them coming.

“One more!” she replied.

The third charge was the most dangerous yet. She'd known it would be, because with every heartbeat that passed, more of the foe, witches included, entered the battle. The hawk grunted and lurched in flight as, despite all she could do to shield it, a crossbow bolt drove into its breast. But it was only temporarily a thing of flesh and blood, and an injury that would have killed an ordinary animal only made it plummet for a heart-stopping instant. It lashed its wings and flew onward, straight at an onrushing spark such as the ones Jhesrhi herself had been throwing around. It was an attack that couldn't hurt her but could certainly destroy the elemental. She shouted a word of power, stretched out her hand, and the spark curved in flight and flew into her fingers. She willed it not to explode just yet, hurled it back at the devil-masked durthan who'd thrown it at her, and only realized afterward that no one had ever taught her to work a spell exactly like the one she'd just performed.

That was interesting, and maybe even a little disquieting, but there was no time to think about it. The battle plan now called for her to protect Aoth while he dealt with whatever measures the enemy had taken to defend the gate. He hadn't done it earlier lest he give away the fact that someone was about to try to rush in from that direction.

Jet swooped over the patch of earth behind the gate, and Aoth pointed his spear at it. A ball of gray light shot out of the point and hit the ground like a stone from a catapult, and although that portion of the courtyard had looked solid to Jhesrhi, the impact sent a thin layer of dirt and cloth tumbling into a deep, square pit with stakes at the bottom. Had he not revealed it, the first berserkers to charge in would have plummeted to their deaths.

Unfortunately, though, Aoth had only solved half the problem. The inhabitants of the fortress had left themselves a bit of solid ground to use to go in and out of the gate. But the spot was a bottleneck that would only allow the Rashemi

and stag warriors to enter two or three abreast, which would make the entryway easy to defend.

Jet lashed his wings, gaining altitude and moving to carry his riders out of the killing box defined by the four walls. Jhesrhi urged her steed after the griffon, but as she did so, she looked for the fallen piece of the gate. Fortunately, it was easy to spot. The occupants of the fortress had needed to shift the heavy iron panel to dig their pit trap, but they hadn't dragged it any farther than necessary.

She spoke to the earth beneath the gate leaf, and the ground heaved like a storm-tossed sea. As goblins and trolls cried out, staggered, and fell, the waves lifted the fallen gate and flipped it over the pit to serve as a bridge.

Jhesrhi smiled. Suddenly an ear-splitting screech jolted her. It stunned the hawk, too, and the conjured steed floundered in flight. Before either of them could recover, a vrock, a demonic mix of vulture and man, hurtled at the hawk and clawed long rents in its torso. The wounds bled a shriek of wind.

Streaking on past the hawk, the vrock snatched for Jhesrhi, and, still dazed as she was by the demon's cry, she found that at that instant, even fire magic was beyond her. She evaded the attack the only way she could, by throwing herself off the other side of her steed. As she did so, the bird vanished, either killed or hurt so badly that it could not maintain a constant, solid shape.

As Jhesrhi plummeted, she strained to focus and articulate a cry for help couched in the language of the wind. After an instant, she managed to gasp it out, and another friendly gale blasted straight upward to slow her descent.

She took a breath and reached for its mind with her own, so it would know where to carry her without her needing to speak the words aloud. Suddenly, a white, slimy-looking hand at the end of an inhumanly long arm shot up from the mass of foes in the courtyard below. It clamped shut on her wrist and jerked her down.

* * * * *

Standing in the searing sunlight, feeling hot to the point of actual pain but enduring it as best he could, Falconer congratulated himself that he'd taken the time to climb to the roof of the donjon. It had delayed his entry into the fight but had also provided him the proper perch to oversee the entire battlefield and contend with a flying foe. Namely, the blonde wizard riding the hawk.

Falconer's vrock had disposed of her steed and made her fall far enough for an ice troll to jump up and drag her the rest of the way to the ground. By rights, that should have been the end of her. But she was plainly dangerous, so he decided to order the demon to descend and help the troll finish her off.

He was just about to give the command via his gauntlet when he spotted the second winged beast and its riders wheeling to rush to their comrade's aid. The priestess and griffon were the same meddlers who'd escaped him before. He'd been hoping for a second chance at them, and he had it.

Focusing his will on his gauntlet, he sent the vrock flapping toward the griffon. Then he called forth the first of his imps.

* * * * *

Columns of smoke were rising from inside the Fortress of the Half-Demon, and creatures roared and yelled beyond the gate. But so far, no one was shouting that a band of berserkers and stag men were creeping up on the castle from the east.

Plainly, Aoth and the other outlanders had furnished as effective a distraction as they'd promised. Despite everything he knew about the Thayan, Vandar had to admire the daring and skill that the trick had required. He wondered

again if Aoth truly meant to betray him. He didn't act like that sort of blackguard, but it was just as difficult to imagine that the spirit of the mound would lie.

A goblin on the wall-walk finally bellowed a warning, yanking Vandar's thoughts back to the task at hand. He leaped up, screeched like a griffon, and gave himself over to the rage of a berserker. As it awoke, he charged; around and behind him, his brothers did the same.

He noticed that *only* his fellow Rashemi were keeping pace with him, or nearly so. The Stag King's warriors were coming on more slowly. But that didn't bother him. In his exalted state, he would have raced in and started killing even if he were alone.

As he neared the walls, he sprang from side to side without slowing, and arrows and javelins stabbed into the snow around him. Instinct, or some perceptual faculty inherent in the red weapons, enabled him to dodge the attacks even though he wasn't consciously aware of them.

Shadow swallowed him for a heartbeat as he ran through the opening in the wall. Metal clanked under his boots when he lunged back out into the sunlight.

Goblins, ice trolls, and a miscellany of other creatures were running at him. They were trying to form the tight ranks that might still enable them to hold the attackers out. He resolved that he wasn't going to let them.

Bellowing, he drove the red spear all the way through a hobgoblin. As he yanked it out again, a second swung a scimitar at his neck, but the horizontal stroke seemed slow, and he had no trouble dropping underneath it. When he had the long spear free, it was easier to jab with the butt than bring the point to bear, so that was what he did. The attack caught the hobgoblin on the jaw. Bone snapped, and the creature flopped backward with a broken neck.

An ice troll reared up from its usual hunched posture to swing a battle-axe straight down on Vandar's head. He sidestepped the chop and drove the spear into the troll's

belly. When he jerked the weapon free, it tugged a loop of gut out with it.

It seemed to Vandar that combat was both easier and more of a joy than it had ever been, and he sensed he could do things he couldn't have done before. He gripped the crimson spear with his off hand alone and found that he could still manage it easily despite its length. He whipped the red sword from its scabbard.

The troll was stuffing the bulge of torn intestine back inside its body. Vandar slashed one leg out from underneath it, then beheaded it before it could finish falling down.

Pivoting, he knocked aside a spear thrust and slashed the green hands that had attempted it, the parry and riposte a single blur of motion. He sensed something rushing in on his flank, and, without even needing to look, flicked the spear into line to catch the attacker in the chest. At the same time, he twitched his head back, and a flail made of braided rawhide and bits of sharp steel whirled past, half a finger length in front of his nose. He sprang and cut down his bugbear attacker before the shaggy, hulking warrior could ready the flexible weapon for another swing.

Vandar grinned. He was dropping a foe with every attack, while his opponents seemed no more able to touch him than they could have grabbed a wisp of smoke. When his brothers hurled themselves, screaming, at the goblins and their ilk, he almost regretted them claiming a share of the fun.

The defenders' lines buckled before the fury of the assault, and for a moment or two, Vandar wondered if they were about to break. Then a fell troll shambled forward, knocking its own comrades aside in its eagerness to join the fight.

The two-headed thing was three times as tall as Vandar, with a bumpy, mottled gray-green hide. Its fleshy, wormlike strands of hair writhed of their own accord, and its fangs and hooked claws were long enough to cut a man to pieces with a single bite or slash.

Vandar wasn't afraid of it. With anger singing inside him and his fey weapons in his hands, he wasn't afraid of anything. But he recognized that the fell troll was a foe capable of slaughtering men by the dozen and repelling the attack. So he scrambled to intercept it.

He threw the long spear like a javelin, and, reacting faster than anything so big should have been able to move, the creature twisted out of the way. Vandar rushed it. A couple of his lesser foes struck at him, and he ducked and slipped the attacks but didn't pause to riposte.

The troll's enormous hands raked and slashed at him. Twisting and sidestepping, Vandar counterattacked, gashing them, breaking talons, and even lopping off fingers. But the damage didn't slow the giant down, and it didn't really even need claws or fingers to hurt him. If one of its swings connected, it would still do so with bone-shattering force.

Vandar had to get inside the reach of the long arms so that he could strike at the troll's vitals. He dodged two more blows, then, hoping he saw an opening, lunged.

It proved to be a mistake. An instant later, the troll's hands caught him from behind and gathered him in. Stooping in the hunchback manner of its kind, it opened its two mouths wide.

Deprived of his balance, Vandar somehow still managed to thrust. The red sword drove into the gaping mouth on the right and out of the back of that head.

Unfortunately, the fell troll still had another head, and even a wound that terrible only made it falter for an instant. It dragged Vandar on toward its other snapping, slavering mouth.

Vandar planted his off hand on his foe's forehead to hold himself clear, and immediately felt the giant's strength overwhelming his own. He let go of the red sword—even if it hadn't been stuck, it would have been difficult to use at such close quarters—and snatched the dirk from his belt.

Screaming, he drove it repeatedly into the head that was still trying to bite him.

He half severed the troll's warty spike of a nose, popped an eye, and then stabbed the blade deep into the gory socket. The troll jerked and pitched forward, carrying Vandar to the ground beneath it.

He struggled to crawl out from under the creature's bulk, noticing as he did so that his leather armor was shredded and his skin was torn and bloody where it had grabbed him. But, still berserk, he didn't feel any pain or care that he was hurt. The only things that mattered were making sure the fell troll didn't get up again and then kill the next foe, and the one after that.

A hobgoblin raised a battle-axe to strike him before he'd quite squirmed all the way clear. Fortunately, another brother of the Griffon Lodge rushed in and slammed his own axe into its torso before it could swing. Vandar jumped up, yanked the red sword out of the troll's right head, and chopped both of its skulls to pieces. Even that might not keep it down forever. But with luck, it would at least neutralize the creature until someone had a chance to set it on fire.

He glanced around and grinned to see that the enemy appeared to be falling back. Maybe the loss of the fell troll had weakened their resolve, or maybe the arrival of the Stag King's warriors was responsible. For they were finally there: fighting alongside their human allies, loosing arrows, jabbing with spears, and dipping their heads to gore with their antlers. The light, cheerful sound of their bells made a strange counterpoint to the shouts, screams, and clashing of blades on armor and shields.

Vandar screeched like a griffon to urge his brothers onward. As he did so, a silvery ripple of power stabbed down from somewhere overhead. It didn't splash over him, but it chilled him even so. However, the berserkers and stag men it did engulf cried out, convulsed, or collapsed. A scant

instant later, a horned, bearded demon leaped in among them and laid about with a glaive.

Folk who weren't berserkers imagined that once a warrior had evoked the rage, he couldn't really think at all. But that wasn't altogether true, at least if the berserker in question had mastered the art as well as Vandar had. He discerned that, although he and his brothers were overcoming the foes in front of them, it was taking too long. More and more undead spellcasters were emerging from the interior of the fortress to attack from the wall-walks, and it was difficult for the embattled men on the ground to do much about it.

The attackers needed their own spellcasters to counter the threat. Where in the name of the Golden Horn were they?

T E N

As it thumped back down to the ground, the ice troll grabbed Jhesrhi's other arm, immobilizing it as well. She cried out in dread and revulsion. The creature opened its reeking mouth wide and lifted her toward its glistening, crooked fangs.

With a thought, she brought the fire that was a part of her leaping forth to cloak her body. The troll howled and flung her away.

Foes were still pressing close on either side. Keenly aware of the danger they represented, full of sheer loathing at their proximity, at the possibility that they too might touch her, she told the wind that still hovered close to her to whisk her back up into the air.

It tried. Her feet left the ground. But a mesh of thick gluey strands like a giant spider web appeared on top of her to stick her to the earth. The wind strained but couldn't break the adhesion.

Sneering, she called forth her flame once more, for as every apprentice knew, that was the counter to such a trap. But the mesh didn't burn.

But at least fire could protect her from the ring of foes that were about to strike at her from every side. Crying a word of power, and straining to shift her entangled staff sufficiently to write a rune on the air, she hurled flame in all directions.

The blast threw some of her assailants off their feet and sent others reeling backward, burning and screaming. But

one remained: a scaly, reddish, long-eared thing that only looked a little singed. Leering, it reached to claw her through the mesh.

Suddenly the beast staggered and fell to one knee as Vandar drove his sword into its back. He hacked repeatedly at its neck, and with the third cut, the lump of a head with its wide fanged mouth and round yellow eyes fell off.

Vandar sawed at the mesh, and the red sword parted the sticky cables easily. Jhesrhi rattled off a counterspell and finished what the blade had begun. The net vanished.

Flinging drops of blood and pale ichor off his weapon, Vandar slashed it through the air to indicate the battlements. “Kill!” he snarled. Maybe, with his rage possessing him, that was as much speech as he could manage.

In any case, it was enough. She understood what he wanted to convey. Despite the attackers’ best efforts, there were too many undead up there. Masked, cloaked durthans were summoning translucent telthor wolves and bears. Nar demonbinders were drawing fiends from talismanic disks of iron, brass, and silver. There were even a couple of Raumvirans—or what she suspected to be Raumvirans—with magic leaping and sparking between their fingers. Insectlike mechanical creatures crouched on their shoulders and at their feet.

Vandar was right: Such creatures couldn’t be allowed to work their magic without interference. Hoping that she was casting at the same magus who’d dropped the mesh on top of her, Jhesrhi hurled flame at the battlements. Meanwhile, Vandar and two of his brothers surrounded her to shield her from enemies on the ground.

* * * * *

The vrock dived, then beat its charcoal-colored wings that glinted an odd magenta color when they caught

Amaunator's light exactly right. Climbing once more, it wheeled toward Cera, Aoth, and Jet.

Beneath it, flame leaped forth seemingly from nowhere to shroud Jhesrhi's willowy body from head to toe. The ice troll that had been about to bite her roared and flung her away instead.

Cera was glad to see that, because she and her companions wouldn't be able to immediately help the elemental. The vulture demon meant to intercept them, and they were going to have to deal with it first.

Cera asked the Keeper for strength and swung her weapon in an arc to point at the vrock. A flying, glowing mace appeared and bashed at the creature's head. Aoth pointed his spear and rattled off words of power, and a shrill whine covered the roar of battle for a heartbeat or so. Even though the noise was prodigiously loud, it somehow didn't hurt Cera's ears, but it slammed the vulture demon lower and made it flail like someone had stuck a sword in it.

Jet instantly furled his wings and dived. Astride his back, Cera couldn't see everything that happened next, but she felt the thump as the griffon's eagle talons stabbed into the demon, then felt the muscles in his hindquarters working as the leonine hind feet raked and raked and raked.

As the griffon clung to the tanar'ri in his attack, they plummeted together. Though Cera trusted him, she gasped when it looked like they were going to crash down among the frenzied combatants below. But with a sudden heaving motion, Jet flung the vrock off his talons, extended his wings with a snap, and leveled off. Cera slumped and closed her eyes in relief just for an instant. When she opened them again, the air was gray with some sort of dust.

In another heartbeat, the wind Jhesrhi had conjured before the berserkers and stag warriors advanced on the fortress, a wind that was still howling and gusting, blew the stuff away. But even as it did so, Cera was jolted by terror. What was she doing there, high above the ground on the back of a

fearsome beast? If Jet smashed to earth, she would be killed, and that had nearly happened just moments before. She let go of her mace, and only the leather thong that looped it to her wrist kept her from losing it—not that she would have cared if she had. All that mattered was freeing up her hand to unbuckle the straps that kept her from jumping to safety.

Hurrying made her hands clumsy, and she fumbled with the harness. In front of her, Aoth thumped his chest and made his mail clink. Despite her panic, Cera realized he was invoking the magic of one of his tattoos.

Then he reached behind him and gripped Cera's thigh. "We're poisoned!" he shouted. "Purge yourself, and Jet, too!"

His words didn't take away her fear, but they pushed it down enough so that she was able to think and to remember the dust. The vulture demon must have somehow released it into the air even as Jet was ripping it apart.

She calmed and centered herself as best she could, then drew down the light and warmth of the Yellow Sun. It filled her and quelled her fear, and then, with a touch, she passed the blessing on to Jet.

The griffon stopped veering madly back as forth as though trying to dodge a peril that only he could see. Instead, he screeched a challenge and lashed his wings as he tried to rise above the half a dozen entirely real imps that, Cera observed, had come flying at him and his riders while they were all distracted.

Blue and green shimmers rippled along the head of Aoth's spear. He snarled a word of power, jabbed the weapon through the air, and darts of light leaped from it to pierce two of the imps. Screaming shrilly, they dropped.

Another imp flew at Cera, its fanged mouth open wide, and its prehensile tail cocked to stab with the sting at the tip. She would have had to strike across her body to bash it with her mace, so she swatted it with her buckler instead. The gilded steel clanked, and the little devil tumbled away.

Meanwhile, Jet snapped another in two with his beak.

The remaining imps vanished, and Cera instinctively winced to imagine them flitting at her like angry wasps when she couldn't see them to protect herself. But Aoth could see them, and since he could, Jet could, too. With his spear crackling with destructive power, the war mage thrust to the right, and the two pieces of a dead imp appeared in midfall. The griffon caught another in his clashing beak, gnashed it up, and spat it out.

As best as Cera could judge, that was the last of the vile little things. "The skull lord!" she gasped, for it seemed almost certain that he was the one who'd summoned them.

"Yes," Jet rasped, "where is ... There!"

Because he was wheeling to aim himself directly at the creature in question, Cera had no difficulty seeing where he meant. The three-headed skeleton with the war hammer and bulky gauntlet was standing on the roof of the donjon.

Aoth looked down into the courtyard, and Cera realized with a pang of guilt that he was making sure Jhesrhi was all right. She herself had forgotten all about their friend, even though they'd all been intent on rescuing her mere moments before. The frenzy of what followed had wiped the thought from her mind.

"All right," said Aoth. "Let's do it!"

Jet hurtled at the top of the keep like an arrow. The skull lord tossed his gauntleted hand. A bat-winged devil somewhat like the imps, but man-sized and covered in quills, appeared above him. The spinagon instantly lashed its wings and flew out over the courtyard. It whipped its arm and threw a volley of quills, which burst into flame as they shot through the air.

Jet raised one wing, dipped the other, and dodged the attack. Aoth growled a rhyme, pointed his spear at the spined devil, and a thunderbolt boomed from the point to blast it apart.

Jet jerked, and Cera realized that something had hurt him somehow. But his wings beat as smoothly and as strongly as

ever, sweeping them all toward their foe as swiftly as before, so evidently it hadn't been bad.

Aoth recited the words to conjure more lightning. Cera drew down the Keeper's power and flung it from the head of her mace in a blaze of brilliant light. The two attacks struck the armored skeleton simultaneously and blasted him apart.

"We got him!" Cera cried.

"Not yet," Aoth said through gritted teeth, and Jet kept on driving at the rooftop as fast as before. She realized they understood something she didn't. And an instant later, she saw what it was.

The skull lord's charred, splintered form flew back together, reassembling him, although for the most part, his broken bones didn't whisk their bent, smoking scraps of armor along with them. That wreckage still lay where it had fallen. But other than that, the undead Nar appeared restored except that he had only two skulls instead of three.

As the skeletal mage sprang to his feet, a crimson light glimmered in the eye sockets of the skull on the right. A great flare of dark red, foul-looking flame leaped forth, and, just a heartbeat short of the rooftop, Jet had to lash his wings and wrench himself off course to dodge it. By the time the griffon had corrected, the skull lord was scrambling through a door that likely opened onto stairs leading down into the keep.

Still, the creature was only a moment ahead of his pursuers. Jet thumped down on the rooftop, and, responding to Aoth's will, the saddle straps instantly unbuckled themselves. He and Cera leaped out of the saddle and ran toward the door.

With a deafening bang, an even larger blast of red fire blew the entrance apart, staggering everyone and jolting the whole roof. When Cera approached the wreckage, coughing and her eyes stinging from the haze of grit now fouling the air, it was plain the detonation had collapsed the stairwell and rendered it impassable. She spat a curse she'd

heard some of the coarser members of the Brotherhood use: a reference to Lady Firehair's anatomy as blasphemous as it was obscene.

"Easy," said Aoth, "we'll kill the thing. Just not right now."

"Don't you have magic that will—" she began.

Aoth waved his spear to indicate the rest of the castle and the battle still raging there. "For now, the fight is here," he said. "Our allies need us to kill the creatures on the wall-walks. And now that we control the highest point in the fortress, we're in a good position to do it."

* * * * *

Bugles blared. Welvelod sensed surges of motion on every side.

The horns were sounding the retreat. Casting about, the undead Raumathari warrior saw that his allies were doing their frantic best to disengage from their foes and scurry toward the various doors that led into the interior of the fortress. Someone—Uramar himself, most likely—must have decided that their side was losing.

Welvelod whirled and bolted for one of the doors into the keep. A stag man jumped in his path and tried to spear him in the chest. He slipped the blow and stabbed at his attacker's flank as he sprinted on by.

Something thumped him between the shoulder blades, pitching him forward into a stumble but not quite making him fall. He didn't know what had hit him—a missile or a handheld weapon—and he didn't bother looking back to find out.

He tripped over the twitching body of an ice troll, and again had to fight to regain his balance. Reeling onward, he saw that the keep, and safety, were just ahead. A Nar demonbinder, his withered gray limbs covered in tattoos and a round brass amulet hanging around his neck, was holding the ironbound door as a pair of goblins scurried through.

The wizard looked straight at Welvelod, then gave him a grin and slammed the door with a bang like a thunderclap.

You filthy Nar bastard! Welvelod thought, just as something rammed into the back of his knee. He fell forward onto the ground. As he rolled over, a second spear thrust caught him in the face.

E L E V E N

The various doors around the castle slammed with a series of thunderous bangs. Gazing down from the rooftop of the keep, Aoth tried to judge if any of the enemy were left trapped in the corner towers or any of the smaller structures along the walls.

“No,” rasped Jet. “According to the Rashemi, the Fortress of the Half-Demon is famous for the dungeons and tunnels underneath it. My guess is that no matter what door a troll or a witch ducked into, there is a way to join up with the rest.”

“You’re probably right,” Aoth said. “Curse it, anyway.”

“Did you think we could stop them from locking themselves in the donjon?” Cera asked, breathing heavily. Despite the cold, her round face was sweaty, and she looked like she was feeling the weight of her mace and armor.

“Not really,” said Aoth. “Given the haphazard way we tackled this, it went as well as we had any right to expect.” He took another look over the battlements. There were a couple of living—or undead—foes still left out in the open, but none that looked worth a burst of his magic. The men-at-arms could deal with them. “Come on, let’s get down there.”

He swung himself onto Jet’s back, and Cera climbed up behind him, buckling in. The griffon lashed his wings and leaped over the row of merlons.

As Jet swooped downward, Aoth looked for Jhesrhi. Still unharmed, she'd already set about the task of burning fallen trolls and the undead. Vandar and the Stag King were all right, too, and it seemed that neither the stag warriors nor the berserkers had suffered an inordinate number of casualties.

The latter were pounding at the castle doors with any makeshift battering ram they could find. But a door wasn't a foe, and without flesh to cut and blood to spill, the berserker rage had little to feed it. One or two at a time, they abandoned the futile assault and stumbled away, gray-faced and shivering.

The Brotherhood, thought Aoth, would still have been strong and ready for another fight. But he knew he wasn't being altogether fair. Even Khouryn's infantry couldn't have managed that mad charge into the castle any better than Vandar's lodge brothers. In fact, despite all their training, they might not have managed as well. There was a time for discipline and tactics—and as far as Aoth was concerned, it was most of the time—but a time for sheer fury as well.

As soon as the saddle straps had unbuckled, Cera jumped off Jet's back and went looking for those who needed her healing ministrations. Aoth took another glance around, just in case something was apparent at ground level that even fire-kissed eyes had missed from the air, and spotted the butt of Vandar's red spear peeking out from under the dead bugbear that had fallen on top of it.

Jet sprang back into the air to keep watch over the battleground from on high. Aoth walked over to the spear and picked it up. He caught his breath at the force and intricate structure of the enchantments he sensed inside it, and felt instantly wary of the weapon. It wasn't that it was cursed, or at least, its maker hadn't intended it to be. But he didn't like the feeling that as he studied it, it was taking his measure as well.

"That's mine!" called Vandar.

Aoth turned to find that the lodge master had come up behind him. He was glaring like he was still facing an enemy, and he still had the red sword in his grip.

Making sure he didn't hurry or look rattled, Aoth proffered the weapon butt first. "I know," he replied. "I was just saving you the trouble of having to look for it."

"I can understand that you covet it," Vandar said. "But the spirits gave it to me, just like they mean for me to have the griffons."

Aoth stared into the other man's eyes. "But you'll settle for half of them," he said. "Because you do remember giving your word?"

Vandar held his gaze for a long moment. Then he blinked, and something that might have been confusion or even a trace of shame flickered across his face. "Yes," he said. "I mean, I keep faith with those who keep faith with me." He hefted the spear. "Thanks for finding this."

"Be careful with it and the sword," Aoth said. "I don't know much about fey weapons—"

Vandar turned toward the spot where some of his fellow berserkers were still trying to smash down a door. "Can't magic break through there?" he asked.

Aoth sighed and said, "I hope so, but it's not going to do it yet. Call your men back."

"We shouldn't give the durthans time to regroup!" the lodge master said.

"*We* need time to regroup," replied Aoth. "Your brothers need to recover their strength, or the enemy will butcher them as soon as they do get inside. Your wounded need care, or they're likely to die. Is that what you want?"

The Rashemi took a breath. "No," he said. "It's just that stopping halfway isn't how a berserker fights." He raised his voice to a bellow. "Brothers! Leave the doors alone for now! Just watch them, and help the wounded!"

"While you and I," said Aoth, "confer with our fellow officers."

They headed for the Stag King, who currently stood amid the phantom beasts he'd wrested from the durthans' control and brought under his own. An enormous wolf fawned at his feet, squirrels sat on his shoulders, and wrens and crows perched on the points of his antlers. It might have looked comical if not for their misty appearance, the foxfire in their eyes, and the gore caking the head of the fey lord's weapon.

"That didn't go too badly," said Aoth.

The Stag King nodded. "I see you pulled the Rashemi back from the doors," he said.

"They've taken a beating already," said Aoth. "Maybe, when we do get the doors open, your warriors should go in first."

The spirit grinned as he replied, "Would that work? I'd be worried that such heroes would charge regardless, and trample my folk in their eagerness to close with the foe."

Vandar snorted. "We might at that," he said. "It's all right, Thayan. The Griffon Lodge is happy to take the lead, in this fight or any other."

Fine, Aoth thought. Be an idiot. What do I care?

Aloud, he said, "We need more men on the walls. After we put them there, we should be able to relax a little. Eat, rest, and recover both our physical strength and our spells. Let's plan on breaching the donjon a little before sundown."

"So you want to fight the undead at night?" asked Zyl. Aoth looked down to find the black hare crouching near his foot.

The Stag King shrugged. "It doesn't matter," he said, "It will be dark inside the keep and in the vaults underneath no matter when we venture in."

"That's true," said Aoth. "And we should expect it's going to get nasty. The enemy knows the ground, and we don't. Most of them will be able to see better than most of us can. They'll try to split us up and lure us into traps. Which means that if we lose our heads, either to panic or to bloodlust, and

go rushing off into the dark, we're done for. Vandar, can you control your lodge brothers?"

"Even when the fury takes us," the Rashemi answered, "we don't lose all our sense." He surprised Aoth by smiling a wry little smile. "Not all of us, not every time. We'll divide up into war bands, each led by a brother far advanced in the mysteries—a man who can ride the anger instead of letting it ride him. The others will move when he moves and stop when he stops."

"Good," Aoth said as he turned to the Stag King. "And you can manage your warriors? I confess, I don't understand much about them, but I don't imagine they've spent much time underground."

"They'll be all right," the spirit replied. "Anyway, they're my concern, not yours."

Aoth took a breath of the smoky air. "I'm not trying to set myself about you, Highness," he said. "Or you, Vandar. But someone has to think about the overall tactical picture. And maybe a captain who's taken more fortresses and fought more undead than he can remember, and who doesn't have the management of one particular part of our army to preoccupy him, is a good choice for the job."

The Stag King waved a dismissive hand. "All right, human," he said. "Perhaps you have a point. I promise, I'll at least listen to whatever you recommend."

Vandar nodded curtly. "So will I," he said.

Finally! thought Aoth.

Jet laughed his screeching laugh inside his master's head. *They just want someone to blame if it all goes wrong.*

* * * * *

Uramar noted how the mushy flesh of the little demonic half-corpse oozed and dripped in Falconer's grip. The skull lord himself looked somewhat the worse for wear. He still had his gauntlet, but the same skirmish that had charred

bits of his bones black had cost him the rest of his gear, and he'd thrown on a brigandine that hung like a sack on his skeletal frame.

The biggest change was the loss of one of his skulls. A pair of Uramar's broken selves—two of the more erudite and less sane ones—were debating whether the Nar could somehow procure another or must manage with only two forevermore.

For a moment their voices waxed painfully loud. Uramar resisted the impulse to grit his teeth and pound at his temples. His command had just lost a fight, and the warrior parts of him understood that at such a juncture, his officers mustn't see him acting crazy or distressed. It would be bad for morale.

Suddenly, the half-corpse spoke, distracting him from his discomfort. "I humbly apologize for making you wait, noblest of wizards. But I'm sure that you comprehend that, surrounded as I am by our mutual enemies, I can't always answer instantly."

According to Falconer, the little half-demon was relaying the words of one Dai Shan, a merchant adventurer out of Thesk. The mortal's accent was strange to Uramar, but his light baritone voice conveyed intelligence and self-assurance.

"We're under siege here," Falconer snapped. "Why didn't you warn me that the Griffon Lodge and their allies were coming?"

"Would that I could have," Dai Shan said, "but to my eternal regret, I didn't know. I'm sure such a sagacious leader as yourself can appreciate that, even though I gather intelligence as assiduously as I can, I'm not privy to everybody's plans. Are you in serious difficulty?"

"I've had better days," the Nar replied. "Is there anything you can do to help us?"

Dai Shan hesitated, or perhaps it simply took a moment for the magic to carry his words across the intervening distance.

“Perhaps, august magus, perhaps,” he said. “As it happens —”

With a soft slurping sound, the remaining flesh of the half-corpse liquefied all at once. It slipped off the little demon’s bones and spilled to the floor in a splash of filth. A couple of Uramar’s voices shrieked with laughter. A more squeamish soul wanted to puke, and its nausea churned his stomach.

“I take it that’s the end of the conversation?” Nyevarra asked. The vampire witch seemed vibrant with impatience. Uramar suspected it was less because her allies had lost the first fight than because the sunlight had kept her from participating and drinking the blood of those who fell victim to her powers.

“Yes,” Falconer said. He dropped the imp’s bones into the puddle of rot at his feet.

“It’s just as well,” said Pevkalondra, sneering. A lustrous, eyeball-sized pearl was set in the left orbit of her shriveled face; and tiny silver scorpions crawled like lice in the folds of her faded blue velvet robe. Since there were only a handful of Raumvirans in the fortress, she arguably didn’t enjoy quite the same status as Falconer and Nyevarra and needn’t have been included in a council of war. But some of Uramar’s shrewder voices had maintained it was politic to summon her to the keep’s shadowy, ruinous great hall along with the other two.

Falconer pivoted to fix the ghoul with his double stare. “And why is that?” he asked.

“Because anyone could hear the treachery in that oh-so-unctuous voice,” Pevkalondra said. “I would have thought even a Nar would notice. But perhaps—”

“Don’t start!” Uramar said. “Please. We’re all brothers and sisters now, united by the creed of Lod. And even if we weren’t, this would hardly be the time to renew old quarrels among ourselves.”

“I realized the Shou probably couldn’t help us,” Falconer said through gritted teeth. “But it did no harm to

communicate with him, and there's no reason to think he's playing us false. He said he chiseled the marks in the tombs under the Iron Lord's castle, and if so—"

Uramar raised his hand with its crooked, mismatched fingers, ridged scars, and piebald skin. "You don't have to justify yourself," he said. "I thought it was worth talking to him myself. Now we need to consider the question he asked us. Are we in serious difficulty?"

Nyevarra made a spitting sound. "Of course not!" she said. "I'm not the only durthan who couldn't venture outside into the daylight. In the tunnels, we can turn the fight around."

"I agree," Falconer said. "My folk have demons we haven't used yet."

Pevkalondra nodded. "And mine, constructs," she added.

Uramar smiled. "Good," he replied. "I knew I could count on your fighting spirit. Now, it seems to me that the best way to crush the intruders is to target their spellcasters. They only have a few, and their side can't win without them."

"Again, I agree," Falconer said. "And no one needs to coax me to focus my efforts on Fezim and the sunlady. I have a score to settle."

"While I," Nyevarra purred, "would take considerable satisfaction in bringing the Stag King low. What sort of dark fey sides with hathrans?"

"Then we have our strategy," Uramar said. "Except that there's one more point to consider. What if, in spite of everything, the enemy gains the upper hand again?"

Pevkalondra snorted. "I plan for victory, not defeat," she said.

One of Uramar's more glib voices advised him how to answer. "But with all respect, lady," he said, "it's one of the strengths of the Eminence that we plan for every contingency. We figure out how to make even defeat serve our purposes. That's why no one can stop us from establishing our empire."

“How nice,” Falconer said. “But what’s the contingency plan now?”

“Simply this,” Uramar said. “If we smash our enemies, excellent. But if the battle goes against us, the more ... rational undead will retreat to safety along the deathways. Meanwhile, we’ll leave zombies in fine armor and durthans’ masks and robes behind to perish with our goblins and such. Some will carry documents to create the impression that by taking this one fortress, our foes have crushed our entire enterprise.”

Even as he articulated the scheme, he felt a pang of guilt; because all undead, even those with the dimmest minds, deserved better. But it was likewise true that any commander sometimes had to sacrifice troops to achieve his objectives.

Nyevarra nodded. “I like it,” she said.

“Good,” Uramar said. “Now, let’s talk specifics. Falconer, you know the fortress better than the rest of us. What’s the best way to harry the mortals as they advance? Where are the best places to make a stand?”

* * * * *

The winter sun had nearly sunk behind the battlements. Jhesrhi knew the next phase of the siege would begin soon, so even though she wasn’t hungry, she made herself take a couple of bites from a hunk of pungent white Rashemi cheese.

She was rewrapping what was left in a threadbare old kerchief when Cera and Aoth approached her. “The Iron Lord of Rashemen has griffons for sale,” the war mage said, smiling a crooked smile. “We should go buy them.”

“It should all be straightforward enough,” Cera said, quoting him as he’d just quoted himself. “The three of us can handle it.”

“Well,” Jhesrhi said, “the three of us are handling it. Give or take.”

“True,” Aoth said. “But be careful inside. Especially down in the vaults, which I’m sure is where we’ll find the hardest fighting.”

She frowned. It wasn’t like him to deliver such vague, useless cautions to a seasoned veteran and trusted comrade like herself.

Cera apparently thought the same. “Are you worried?” she asked. “Did you have a vision?”

Aoth snorted. “You and your thirst for revelations,” he said. *No*, thank the Firelord. I just wish we were doing this with the Brotherhood. But wishing won’t make it so, so let’s get on with it.”

The berserkers and stag men had already heard the plan, so it didn’t take long for them to form up in a rough horseshoe shape around the tall double doors in the center of the keep. Jhesrhi stood inside the arc and fixed her eyes and her will on the ironbound panels before her.

Pointing her staff at the doors, she recited a counterspell to dissolve the enchantments that buttressed them. Then she spoke to the mundane mechanisms that likewise secured them, commanding pins to lift and bars to slide.

Nothing happened.

But that was all right. The spells she’d just attempted were the least of her magic. Next, she tried to breach the stone to the left of the doors as she’d shifted the cavern walls in Grontaix’s subterranean palace. Chanting, she swung her staff in a horizontal pass to indicate where and how she wanted it to split.

Warded like the entryway by the magic of the ancient Nars, the sandstone blocks ignored her.

It was going to take fire. Somehow, she’d imagined that it would.

Sweeping her staff up and down in a pass that suggested leaping flame, she recited a rhyme in one of the hissing,

crackling languages of the Undying Pyre. The fire that was a part of her sprang forth to cloak her.

But that blaze was a feeble guttering candle compared to the heat, or the potential for heat, concentrating in her hands and her staff. When she'd gathered all she could hold, she raised the brass rod over her head and swung it at the doors like an axeman cleaving a foe from the scalp down.

A torrent of flame poured from the head of the staff. Neither the heat nor the brightness troubled Jhesrhi, but her allies cried out and recoiled.

For a heartbeat or two, the doors withstood even such an assault. Then the wood caught all at once, burning away to nothing in an instant. Half melted and deformed, the door's ironwork dropped, clanking onto the threshold.

Something as big as an ogre, with the head of a cat and a whipping tail as scaly as a dragon's, sprang out of empty air. Jhesrhi realized the gaunt form was a demon the Nars had bound in the entryway as the linchpin of their defensive magic. It was the fiend's strength she'd been contending against, and, paradoxically, by overcoming it, she'd set her adversary free.

The demon stretched out its clawed hands and lunged at a berserker. Aoth pointed his spear and pierced the creature with darts of blue light. The tanar'ri staggered, and that gave Vandar enough time to rush it and slash open its belly with the red sword. Loops of guts came sliding out, and the creature collapsed. A second cut split its skull and spilled its brains.

Since it wouldn't do to set the donjon on fire, at least not yet, Jhesrhi extinguished the streaming, hissing flare and her personal halo of flame. Cera swung her mace in an overhand arc that ended with it pointing at the doorway. The pure light of the Yellow Sun flashed in the chamber on the other side. It might not hurt a goblin or troll, but it ought to discomfit most types of undead.

Nothing cried out. The berserkers surged forward. “No!” Aoth barked. “Vandar and I will go through first.” He shot the lodge chieftain a glance. “Carefully.”

The berserker scowled but also nodded brusquely. “As you say,” he replied.

Picking their way through glowing coals and scraps of hot iron, the two men prowled into the keep. Jhesrhi strode after them and entered with the first wave of Vandar’s eager lodge brothers.

She found herself in a roomy, high-ceilinged vestibule, with an arched opening leading to other chambers on that level, and a staircase twisting upward. The enemy had left footprints along with drops and smears of blood in the dust when they made their hurried retreat back into the fortress. But, except for a dead hobgoblin that had evidently succumbed to its several wounds just after staggering inside, no one was there any longer.

Vandar looked around the gloomy, echoing space. “You were right,” he said to Aoth. “They’ve gone down into the crypts like the dead things they are.”

“Maybe not all of them,” Aoth replied. “In their place, I’d leave a force hidden above ground, on the upper levels of this keep, in one of the secondary towers, or wherever, to follow us down into the tunnels and attack us from behind when it would do the most harm. So we’re going to sweep the castle room by room. *Then* it will be time to head downstairs.”

* * * * *

The *Storm of Vengeance* possessed more than her fair share of spellcasters, and none of them trusted Dai Shan. Their scrutiny made it difficult to achieve privacy. But after some investigation, he’d found a sort of nook in the hold, a space walled off by a bulkhead and a bundle of barrels

lashed in place, that sufficed as long as he kept his voice down and didn't let anyone spot him sneaking in or out.

Unfortunately, it was cramped, filthy, and stank of spoiled foodstuffs. But Dai Shan didn't allow its unpleasantness to hasten his departure. He sat cross-legged, closed his eyes, breathed slowly from the diaphragm, and considered the implications of his annoyingly curtailed conversation with Falconer.

After he had assessed them as best he could, he still had a smaller matter to ponder: how to dispose of the useless half of the little dead demon. He was tempted just to leave it where it lay and let the rats he heard scuttling elsewhere in the hold gnaw it until nothing recognizable was left. But it was possible someone would stumble across it before that happened, and then Mario Bez would want to know why there were tanar'ri bones aboard his skyship.

Dai Shan preferred to not have such a possibility hanging over his head. Better to take a small risk, and afterward, enjoy the tranquility that came with knowing he'd resolved the situation. That was the path his father would have chosen.

With the gloom proving no hindrance to his sight, he prowled around the hold until he found a piece of oilcloth. Permitting himself a slight frown of distaste—the half-imp, or what was left of it, was even more repulsive to the touch—he bundled up the slime and bones and proceeded to the deck hatch that was farther forward.

Once on the companionway, he whispered a charm that caused the grime to fall away from his person. Next came a spell to deflect the attention of any potential observer for a critical moment. Then he climbed onto the deck and lowered the hatch behind him.

Trying to seem casual, he glanced around. As far as he could tell, no one was paying any attention to him, not even Olthe, the mannish-looking battleguard, who was practicing her axe strokes just three paces away.

Wondering if the hulking creature ever chopped the rigging, and if so, whether anyone, even Bez, had the nerve to complain about it, Dai Shan sauntered to the rail. He slipped the bundle over the side, and that was that.

He celebrated the success of his maneuver by taking a moment to enjoy the view of the frozen expanse of Lake Ashane shining red in the light of the setting sun. Though he'd never traveled by skyship before, it hadn't taken him long to discover that flight was a pleasure unlike any other in his experience. He felt godlike with the whole world spread out below him, and he promised himself again that, however the House of Shan ended up disposing of the rest of the wild griffons, he'd keep the blue-eyed king of the pride for himself.

Unfortunately, he couldn't just stand and enjoy the view for long; there was work to be done. He turned and made his way to the stern castle, where Bez stood at the great oaken wheel. He had underlings who knew how to steer the ship, but he seemed to enjoy taking turns at the task himself.

As Dai Shan mounted the companionway, he wondered what good it did for anyone to steer when the rudder projected not into water but rather empty air. Presumably, it was part and parcel of the same magic that allowed the *Storm* to fly at all.

"Illustrious captain," Dai Shan said.

"Greedy merchant," the sellsword replied, with a leer that indicated he was indulging his notion of humor. "Where have you been lurking?"

"A quiet corner conducive to meditation," the Shou said, "where I could stay out from underfoot as your industrious crew pursued their manifold tasks."

Bez grunted and turned the wheel a notch to starboard. The correction didn't appear to require any action from the sailors in the rigging, but those manning the windlasses controlling the folding wings immediately started cranking.

“That sounds like a good place for you,” the sellsword commander said. “But I take it you think we need to talk.”

“The captain is as shrewd as he is courageous,” Dai Shan said. “When I meditate, I sometimes find it possible to send my spirit flying free of fleshly constraints. So it was this afternoon. I scouted ahead and witnessed the Griffon Lodge already attacking the Fortress of the Half-Demon.”

Bez scowled. “The Maiden of Pain take you then, you son of a sow,” he said. “If you hadn’t insisted that I come back to Immilmar to collect you, the *Storm* could have gotten there first. As it stands, I guess we’ll just have to hope the berserkers aren’t up to the job. Then we can come flying heroically onto the scene to turn defeat into victory.”

Dai Shan bowed. “As always, when my shrewd ally speaks, I hear wisdom,” he replied. “That is indeed one possibility. But, if I may be so bold, perhaps we should take care not to discount any of our options prematurely.”

T W E L V E

Stop,” said Aoth. Ahead, where the tunnel widened out into a spacious pentagonal vault with five other corridors leading away from it, an intricate mosaic covered the floor. Hidden in the pattern, but visible to spellscarred eyes, was a pentacle glimmering with pale green phosphorescence.

“I see it, too,” Jhesrhi said, “more or less. I’ve been speaking to the stone around us. It’s sick. Poisoned by the things that have been festering inside it for all these centuries. And there’s what amounts to a big chancre straight ahead. It’s a powerful demon, I think.”

“Do we know any more about it than that?” Cera asked, letting her mace dangle from its martingale so she could tuck a stray blonde curl back up under her helmet.

Apparently, no one did.

“I can tell you this,” Aoth said, “when it pops out at us, it won’t be alone. Unless I miss my guess, there are other foes lurking on the far side of those arches where we can’t see them. In the side passages behind us, too.” The allies had tried to check and clear such potential trouble spots as they explored, but without splitting men off from his little army again and again, there was no way to keep the tunnels cleared. They were too much of a maze. Passages hooked around and linked together in unpredictable ways.

"If we know it's an ambush," said a warrior at Aoth's back, "what do you say we don't walk into it? Let's find a way around."

"No," said Vandar, his red spear gleaming in the glow Cera had conjured to light their way. "Let's turn the trap against the trappers."

Aoth nodded. "I agree," he said. "It's not like we can actually avoid fighting the demon. The Nars will pull it out of its cage eventually. At least up ahead there's room for a bunch of us to fight at the same time, and since we know what to expect—well, partly—we can give the enemy a surprise instead of the other way around."

"Should we find out what the Stag King thinks?" Cera asked.

"No," said Aoth. "If he wanted to voice his opinions, he should have walked in front with the rest of us. Here's what we are going to do ..."

When he had finished laying it out for them, and his orders had been whispered from man to man down the tunnel at his back, he reached out to Jet. *Anything?* he asked.

No, the griffon answered. *If the Nars have tunnels that come up outside the castle, they aren't using them to slip away. Not as far as I can see.*

Good, because we're about to release a demon. It wouldn't be a particularly clever thing to do if the real enemy were already long gone.

It likely isn't a clever thing to do, anyway. But that never stopped you before.

The word came back up the tunnel that everyone knew what he was supposed to do. Aoth and his companions prowled onward. The soft, muffled sound of footfalls, clicking hooves, and creaking leather, and of the occasional murmur or growl of a spirit animal, attested to the line of allies moving up behind them.

As the leaders prowled into the crypt, Aoth noticed that not only was it large, but also the vaulted ceiling was high

enough to accommodate even a true giant. Wonderful. As he steeled himself to deliberately step on the outermost line of the pentacle, Vandar brushed past him.

Fine, Aoth thought, you do it. And the berserker did, nearly stamping on that part of the mosaic.

The demon exploded into view and roared a word of power at the same time. It was every bit as huge as Aoth had feared it might be, with horns, a lupine head, a shaggy red-black pelt, and disproportionately large crab-like pincers at the end of each long, burly arm. The charge of force the word carried knocked Aoth and his comrades staggering.

He found his footing, shouted his own word of command, and hurled a thunderbolt at the demon's torso. Jhesrhi matched him with a fan-shaped flare of fire; and Cera, with a scorching shaft of Amaunator's light. Seemingly startled by the speed of their response, the glabrezu flailed its claws and stumbled a step.

But it wasn't enough for the three of them to strike back. Their allies needed to start fighting, and once again, Aoth had to admit that the madmen of Rashemen had their uses. Even his sellswords might have hesitated, if only for a heartbeat or two, if such a huge horror had suddenly burst into view directly in front of them. The berserkers didn't. Vandar screeched like a griffon, his brothers responded in kind, and they all charged.

What Aoth found even more impressive was that they acted exactly as he'd ordered them to. Some threw themselves at the demon, while others raced to intercept the enemies who, he was certain, were about to pour into the chamber from the other tunnels. The latter was arguably an act of even greater courage, because it required the beserkers to turn their backs on the glabrezu.

Vandar was one of the warriors who rushed the demon. He thrust the red spear completely through the creature's left leg. The glabrezu pivoted toward him, and in so doing, sidestepped and jerked the beserker off his feet. Vandar let

go of the spear, and, nimble as a tumbler in a carnival, rolled to his feet with the scarlet broadsword in his hand.

Aoth aimed his spear at the glabrezu's chest and rattled off the first words of an incantation that would blast it with a rainbow of destructive effects. Suddenly, the light in the chamber flickered and dimmed, and behind him, Cera screamed.

* * * * *

The Stag King had some inkling that Aoth Fezim considered him a shirker, and it alternately annoyed and amused him. He could match himself against any foe, as he'd proved in the courtyard. But it was asinine for a war leader to march in the vanguard and be exposed to every pit trap and skirmisher sniping from cover. And if the Thayan didn't understand that, then he was a fool no matter how many liches and dragons he'd defeated, or how keenly his burning blue eyes saw what others could not.

Besides, someone needed to be rearguard—Aoth acknowledged that himself. So why shouldn't it be the Stag King and his servants? Unless he missed his guess, the fighting here at the back of the column was likely to prove every bit as hard and as important as the battle at the front.

An echoing roar, the shouts of men, the cries of other things, and the boom and crackle of magic all mixed together, told him the battle had begun. He peered down the passage behind him, at the arched openings leading to other tunnels, and waited for his own particular foes to appear in the gloom. Beside him, a semitransparent, faintly luminous telthor in the form of a huge wolf sniffed the cold, musty air. It growled, and its fur bristled.

Dark figures surged up the tunnel and out of all the doorways in view. Others simply plunged through the solid stone of the walls, floors, and ceiling. The stench of putrefaction filled the Stag King's nose—more indication, if

anyone needed it, that he and his fellow warriors were primarily facing the undead.

And is that supposed to daunt me? he asked himself, grinning. With a thought, he commanded the spirit animals to oppose the wraiths and such; since the telthors weren't made of solid flesh, either, they were best suited to the task. Then he bellowed a war cry, stepped to meet the creatures shambling up the passage, and cut a withered ghoul in two with a sweep of his antler-axe. Behind him, weapons thudded home as his offspring—degenerate, disappointing brutes, but able warriors all—started fighting, too. They woke the bells in their antlers, and the little orbs chimed and chimed and chimed.

The Stag King drove his weapon into another ghoul's chest, smashing ribs, pulping the rotten organs inside, and snapping its spine. Then he struck a zombie's head off. He'd already lost count of how many foes he'd dispatched, and if he wasn't careful, he was going to give himself over entirely to the frenzy and urgencies of melee, to think of the opponent in front of him and nothing more. Especially since, with the fight raging along a corridor and in the mouths of the intersecting passages, it was virtually impossible to keep track of the overall tactical picture anyway.

But he knew that as the leader of his group, he had to try, partly because so far, the durthans hadn't made their presence felt. When they started weaving magic, it would be his task to counter it.

Perhaps believing its lack of substance would keep it safe, a ghost with a wavering smudge of a face flew at him with wispy hands outstretched. He sliced it to tatters with his axe. A dead goblin with a crushed head swung its scimitar at the Stag King's kidney. He parried and smashed its skull even farther out of shape. It flopped back against the creatures shoving up behind it.

Power suddenly shivered through the air. It wasn't truly sound or light or heat or cold, but anyone with mystical

abilities would have sensed it somehow. The Stag King felt it as a twinge in his joints and a vile bitter taste on his tongue.

A phantom bear faltered as the witches sought to retake control of it. A ghostly badger fell down convulsing.

The Stag King sneered, focused his will to slap the durthans' power away from their former familiars, and found that it wasn't that easy. Apparently the undead witches had taken advantage of the time between battles to figure out how to contend with him more successfully.

The only way they could possibly accomplish such a thing was if several of them were working in concert. Employing a trick of perception he'd mastered millennia before, he deafened himself to all the echoing roars of the battle except for the cold, intricate chanting that, he surmised, the louder noises covered.

The rest of the world fell silent, and he did indeed hear the witches' incantation. He'd expected them to be working behind the protection afforded by their massed warriors, and so they were. They were also on the far side of a doorway on the left, out of the lethal chaos of the central corridor.

The Stag King allowed his hearing to revert to normal, and the noise of the battle exploded at him. He chopped with the antler-axe and sent a blast of pure force down the passage, smashing some of the ghouls and zombies off their feet and jolting others backward. Then he plunged forward, and some of his offspring, spirit animals that were still strong and obedient to his will, and a couple of screaming berserkers drove forward along with him.

Once he and his servants and the undead jammed together, the Stag King gained ground with every chop, jab, and shuffling half step until the arch was just ahead. He struck again and again till he cut and smashed the final clawing, stabbing, decaying obstacles out of his way. Then he lunged into the side passage.

There were six masked witches gathered in a circle around a little blue fire on the floor. The smoke from the blaze made

an eye-stinging haze in the air, and the malignant power of the ritual made grimacing faces take shape and melt away in the sandstone walls. Some were crying tears of blood, which remained even after the sources had dissolved.

The durthans pointed their wands and staves at the Stag King. He raised his power once again, chopped, and cast another burst of force. It staggered the witches and scattered the scraps of bone and desiccated flesh that fueled the fire.

It was a good start. But so far, none of the Stag King's minions had managed to follow him through the arch. He was on his own, and that meant he didn't dare give any of the renegade wise women a chance to recover. He started after them, but saw other robed figures flow into visibility and solidity all around him. He belatedly realized that the haze was made not only of smoke but also of mist, and the one had concealed the presence of the other.

He roared and flailed with all of his strength. But several vampire women were clinging to him, and some of them managed to hold on.

One of them crooned in his ear. "Do you know me?" she said. And he did. He just had time to recognize the voice of Nyevarra, who'd fought so cunningly in the Witch War, before two cold needles slid into his neck.

* * * * *

Aoth's aborted spell discharged its power in a crackling shower of sparks. He pivoted in the direction of Cera's scream, but couldn't quite see her. She was all but lost in the middle of a slashing whirl of shadow demons, and evidently couldn't produce a blaze of light bright enough to destroy or repel them. The demons were somehow making the glow that emanated from her flicker and dim. If it went out altogether, the attackers would have nothing but a few torches and luminous crystals to pierce the ambient murk.

Leaving the glabrezu to Jhesrhi, Vandar, and its other berserker assailants for the time being, Aoth aimed his spear and hurled darts of light at the shadows. It was far from the most powerful attack spell in his arsenal, but he didn't dare cast any of the deadliest ones for fear of hitting Cera as well.

Two dark forms with ragged black wings and long horns curling up from their heads spun out of the whirl in his direction. He charged his spear with the seething essence of chaos and struck at one of the shadows. It dodged, and at the same moment, something jolted him, although the shock was psychic, not physical. His body abruptly felt numb as his spirit began to separate from it.

Aoth snarled a word of defense, invoked the magic bound in a tattoo, and flesh and soul locked together once more. But his instant of clumsiness allowed the demon he'd struck at to tear the spear from his grip and toss it away. Both shadows rushed in raking with their claws.

Covering up with his shield, trying to keep either of the demons from getting behind him, Aoth scrambled backward, bumping into someone, and struggling to retain his balance. He snatched out his sword and charged it with a shimmer of destructive power. He feinted a cut at one of the demons, before spinning and extending at the other.

That shadow was lunging at him, and it impaled itself. The magic in the blade frayed it into wisps of darkness.

Aoth pivoted back in the opposite direction. The other shadow demon wasn't there anymore.

Suspecting that it had shifted behind him, he kept turning, just barely in time to block a claw slash with his targe, and then slice the demon across the belly. His foe broke apart into tatters of murk, which then dissolved entirely.

He turned back toward Cera and found he was farther away and could barely see her. The vault was crowded with berserkers and stag warriors rushing to engage one foe or another, or else tottering back from the battle line with streaming wounds. Still, no one could have missed the flash

when she finally succeeded in channeling Amaunator's power. All but one of the remaining shadow demons vanished instantly. The last one tried to shield itself by dropping down into the floor, but unraveled away to nothing when it was only waist-deep in the stone.

Aoth weaved and shoved his way to Cera. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she panted, "the Keeper protected me."

"I saw," he said, wanting to embrace her but knowing he didn't have time. He looked around and decided that, although Vandar and his lodge brothers had done a fair job of carving up its lower body, and Jhesrhi, of burning the fur off patches of its upper parts, the glabrezu remained the greatest threat in view. He cast about, found his spear, and picked it up. "We need—"

A blast of dirty red flame hurled back the Rashemi fighting in one of the doorways. Into the breach charged a blaspheme, a hulking monstrosity made of pieces from many different corpses. One green eye and one brown one, the former a finger-width higher than the latter, glared from beneath the rim of the creature's helmet. The ugly face was lumpy, mottled, and crisscrossed with scars.

The patchwork creature wore a suit of plate articulated differently than any that Aoth had ever seen. But he was more concerned about the brute's weapon than its armor. To his eyes, the greatsword fairly sweated destructive power, and when the blaspheme slashed one of Vandar's brothers with it, the berserker's flesh withered even as his knees buckled underneath him.

Beside the blaspheme advanced the skull lord from the roof of the keep, hacking with a falchion. And behind them, a wedge of howling goblin-kin and bellowing ice trolls surged forth. Aoth realized that, once again, the glabrezu would have to wait.

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The Stag King felt cold and dazed. Through his muddled thoughts whispered the promise that if he'd only flop down on the floor and submit, the chill would turn to ecstasy.

Bellowing, he dropped his antler-axe so that he could grab hold of Nyevarra, rip her fangs out of his throat, and fling her away. It was only after he did so that he realized a second vampire was clinging to him and sucking at a bite in his forearm. He tore her loose and threw her down the corridor as well.

Unharméd, both durthans rolled back onto their feet. Meanwhile, he was still numb and weak. He shouted for help with both his voice and his mind. Some of his offspring would surely hear the former, and every spirit animal he'd brought under his sway should register the latter. He just had to hold out until help reached him. He stooped to grab his axe, but it wasn't there.

Nyevarra laughed, and he saw that she'd collected the weapon when he wasn't looking. She tossed it clattering down the passage, putting it even farther out of his reach. Her gaze stabbed at him. It made him feel like she was lunging at him, or that the world had tilted on end and sent him falling down at her.

Her stare would paralyze him if he let it. He jerked his eyes away and saw a brown-robed witch rushing in on his flank with her clawed, decay-mottled hands poised to snatch and rend. He lowered his head and whipped it up again. His antlers ripped both her black leather mask and the face beneath it away.

By that time, one of the vampires was rushing him. He caught hold of her as he bellowed, and he jerked her head off her shoulders. Slime pattered out of her robes as her flesh began to liquefy.

He grinned at the other undead witches. "Who's next?" he croaked.

He didn't really expect his bravado to frighten them into turning tail, and it didn't. But no one else was reckless enough to fight him hand to hand. Instead, standing together, they snarled and hissed curses that made his heart stutter, his guts twist, and fresh blood stream from the cold, throbbing bites in his neck and forearm.

A single phantom hawk swooped through the archway behind him. A witch robed in black and white rattled off a rhyme, and the telthor's body twisted as though invisible hands had seized it and wrung it like a washcloth. It vanished as it fell to the floor.

Zyl hopped through the opening and cried the opening words of an incantation in his shrill voice. A durthan in a brown cloak had pounced on him like a cat before he could finish. She ripped at his body with her jagged claws and flung bloody chunks through the air. The Stag King grieved momentarily for his servant, before grimly refocusing on his own plight.

Through gritted teeth, the Stag King muttered charms of protection that seemed to do no good at all. He struggled to advance on the witches, but it was like walking into a gale. In his addled, pain-ridden condition, he couldn't tell if the enemy had conjured an actual wind or if it was the pressure of Nyevarra's gaze shoving back at him.

Whatever it was, after a straining step or two, it stopped him. He wondered, with more amazement than dread, if, after all these millennia, he'd finally fallen into the trap he wouldn't be able to fight or trick his way out of. He gathered his strength for a supreme and perhaps final effort.

Growing in an instant, brambles shot up from the floor. They whipped around him, yanked themselves tight, and plunged their long thorns deep into his flesh.

He strained to break free, but to no avail. The only effect was to tear the punctures wider around the thorns. The durthans pounced on him.

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First, the Stag King stopped flailing, then he stopped twitching, and a few heartbeats after that, Nyevarra and her sister witches stepped back from his corpse. She wiped her bloody lips with the back of her hand and slipped on a tarnished silver mask.

“Do we give him the chance to rise?” asked a durthan in red.

“No,” the vampire said. “Take his head and fetch his weapon.”

The witch in red retrieved the axe and used it to decapitate its erstwhile owner. It took four bone-splintering chops for the Stag King’s head to tumble away from his neck. She stooped and picked it up by one of the antlers.

“Now,” said the vampire in the silver mask, “let’s see if his retainers still want to fight when we show them proof that their lord is dead.”

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Aoth advanced to meet the patchwork swordsman, and, with a limp that might be the result of having mismatched legs, the creature moved to meet him. So did Aoth’s former antagonist, the skull lord.

And Cera knew, so surely that it was possible the Keeper or one of his exarches had whispered the information to her, that her lover couldn’t contend with both foes at once. Not in such a press, where he couldn’t cast his most potent spells without smiting friend as well as foe. She had to help him.

She swept her mace over her head, drew down the Keeper’s power, and hurled a shaft of radiance from the head of the weapon. It struck the skull lord like a battering ram and knocked him backward.

Well, she had his attention. In the moment it took him to recover his balance, she rattled off a second prayer. Floating sigils of golden light shimmered into existence all around her.

She was just in time, for an instant later, red light flickered in the orbs of one of his skulls, and then a flare of crimson fire leaped at her. The scorching heat and sickening vileness of it rocked her backward, and for a moment made it feel like there was nothing around her to breathe but filth and embers. Then the flame went out, and she gasped in cleaner air. Frantically taking stock, she found that the attack had only blistered her. The floating runes had shielded her from the worst.

But the fiery blast had provided the skull lord with cover of a sort, and he'd used it to rush forward. Indeed, he'd nearly closed the distance between them. Terror jolted Cera and froze her in place.

Or rather, it tried. She gasped, "Keeper!" and warmth poured into her. It didn't purge her of every trace of her fear—it probably would have needed to steal her reason to do that—but the unnatural, paralyzing dread dropped away.

The skull lord's falchion leaped at her. She blocked with her buckler, and the heavy blade hit so hard that for an instant she feared the stroke had broken her arm. She tried to hit back with her mace, but she was off balance, and the riposte didn't come anywhere near her foe. The skull lord chopped at her again, and it was only Tymora's favor that enabled her to flounder back out of range.

It was plain that, despite all she'd learned during her time with Aoth, she was nowhere near up to the task of defeating her ghastly opponent in a contest of arms. As he advanced, she again reached up for the power of the Yellow Sun and rattled off a prayer. She didn't know if she could finish it in time, but her only real hope was to try.

A pair of ghostly warriors, each a blur of amber light, appeared between her and the skull lord. He tried to lunge

between them, but they shifted to hold him back and struck at him with their swords.

Sheltering behind them, Cera hurled bursts of Amaunator's power, shafts of sunlight infused with holiness and the deity's righteous hatred of the undead. The third such attack blasted the skull lord into burning scraps of bone.

For an instant, forgetting what she'd learned previously, Cera hoped that was the end of the thing. Then the charred fragments of skeleton slid and jumped back together, commencing the task of reassembling him.

No! she thought. Not again! And though the exertions, physical and otherwise, of the last few moments had left her winded and weak, she scrambled forward to smash the one skull that remained intact. Sliding like pieces on a lanceboard, her conjured protectors moved with her.

She thought she had closed the distance in time, because she reached the skull lord when his power was still putting him back together. But the arm with the gauntlet had already reassembled itself, and, via scapula and vertebrae, reconnected to the remaining fleshless head. The Nar tossed his hand and released the servant he'd held in reserve.

A thing like a deformed cherub with bruised-looking purple skin burst into view, a necklace of mummified eyeballs swinging from its blubbery neck. It lashed its leathery wings, shot at Cera, and stretched out stubby hands with long black claws. Her glowing bodyguards cut at it and missed. She tried to deflect it with her buckler but failed to lift the armor quickly enough.

The demon slashed at her face as it hurtled by. Pain ripped through her head, and everything went black. She realized the tanar'ri might just have torn out her eyes.

For an instant, horror threatened to drown out every other thought. Then something—her deity's grace, perhaps, or the knowledge that she was fighting not only for herself but also

for Aoth, or pure loathing of the skull lord—impelled her to frantic calculation.

Vicious as the little demon was, its master remained the greater threat. If it wasn't already too late, she had to put an end to him before he finished restoring himself. But she couldn't, because she couldn't target him!

But no, that was panic talking. She hadn't really changed her position; she had just reeled back a step. And if he hadn't yet managed to do so, either, she knew where he was. Reaching out to the Keeper and drawing down his power, she swung her mace and hammered and scoured the floor with a searing radiance she could only feel, not see.

Wheezing, with her legs wobbling, all but giving way under the weight of her armor, Cera waited to see if someone or something would strike back at her. Nothing did.

The throbbing pain in her face eased a little, and blinking, she made out a smear of light. She swiped away the blood running down from gashes on her forehead, and she could see more. Obviously, the demon hadn't actually ripped out her eyes after all. It was venom in its talons, or some magical effect, that had extinguished her vision temporarily.

There was nothing left of the skull lord but ash and cinders, and no sign of the demon whatsoever. Either it was fighting elsewhere in the roaring frenzy of the battle, or it had fled the scene when its master died.

In any case, it wasn't flying around Cera anymore, and for that, she was grateful. She had nothing left to fight it with, either physically or magically. Still flanked by her phantom bodyguards, she retreated toward the relative safety of a section of the crypt her comrades controlled, before noticing a surging confusion in one of the doorways.

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The glabrezu aimed a pair of its oversized pincers at Jhesrhi. Pulses of purple light lit the black claws from within.

She threw herself to the side. A blast of toxic force pounded the spot she'd just vacated, cracking that piece of the floor and flinging bits of stone into the air.

What does it take to kill the thing? she wondered. She'd already burned most of the fur off the top of it and charred the flesh underneath. A dozen of Vandar's berserkers had given their lives to help him cut its legs to ribbons. But it still wouldn't fall down.

She lifted her staff in both hands and called to the stone in the ceiling. *For centuries, she told it, the demon tormented you and made you sick. Now you can take your revenge. I'll help you.*

The ceiling extruded a pair of enormous hands. They clapped shut around the demon's head and squeezed.

The glabrezu thrashed and beat uselessly at the clenching, grinding trap with its claws. I've got it! Jhesrhi thought. But suddenly the glabrezu vanished and reappeared just to the left of where it had been, which was to say, free of the hands. The fiend smashed the rocky appendages with a sweep of its arm. Still attuned to the stone, Jhesrhi heard it cry out in pain.

In need of a moment to center herself and refocus her energies, she backpedaled. As she did so, she noticed the warriors—stag men, mostly—pouring into the vault through the same arch that had previously admitted her and the rest of their comrades.

There was nothing inherently wrong with that. The crypt was where Aoth had wanted to make a stand, and all troops were supposed to make their way into it as expeditiously as was consistent with good order and protecting their rear. But she could tell the stag men weren't hurrying in to fight. They were fleeing, bumping into their allies, knocking them down, and trampling them in their haste, spreading alarm and disarray.

Their little army obviously didn't have much of a rearguard anymore. Something was routing it, and that same

something threatened to stab into the very heart of the company just as soon as the fleeing stag men cleared the way.

Jhesrhi decided that the dismantling rearguard was an even bigger problem than the glabrezu. But what could she do about it when she was on the wrong end of the passageway?

She cast about and saw that Vandar's berserkers had successfully defended another of the doorways leading into the chamber, killing or repulsing the enemy who'd attacked from that direction. There were just a couple of Rashemi there, keeping watch.

Jhesrhi reached out again to the stone around her. Upset that it had taken harm at her behest, its mind tried to tug away from her own.

I'm sorry, she told it, but for something as big as you, that hurt was just a tiny scratch. I need you. Show me how that tunnel connects to the one next to it.

The stone didn't answer for a moment. Then a diagram of sorts flowed into view before her inner eye.

Thank you, she said.

So far, so good. She knew that no one soldier, even a wizard, should venture through any part of the maze alone. She looked for warriors to accompany her, but most of the berserkers were already engaged in one vital struggle or another. The only exceptions were casualties, pale and shaky from pain, blood loss, and the sickness that overtook them when their rage had run its course. Several of the least enfeebled were shouting and waving their arms in a futile attempt to bring the influx of frightened rearguarders under control.

For want of anyone better, Jhesrhi strode in the direction of the stag men. They spotted her, first one and then another, and her approach did what the Rashemi couldn't. The creatures stopped struggling to shove farther away from

whatever was behind them and peered at her with brown, shining eyes.

What is it? she wondered, unsettled. What is it they think they see?

But she knew it wasn't the time to ponder the question. Hoping it would further impress them, she cloaked herself in flame.

During her time with the stag men, she'd learned that although they couldn't speak, they all understood at least a bit of Elvish. So she switched to what she knew of that tongue, shouted for the stag warriors to follow her, and reinforced the command by sweeping her staff at the archway that was clear. Then she strode in that direction.

For a heartbeat, the stag warriors stayed right where they were, and she thought that, whatever the basis of their interest in her, it wasn't profound enough to overcome their fear. A moment later, their bells chiming and hooves clattering on the floor, they trotted after her, between the surprised berserker sentries, through the litter of bloody corpses, and on down the passageway.

She wanted to tell them to silence their bells but didn't know the right words to give the order. The glow of her fiery mantle would likely alert the enemy that they were coming in any case, and she wasn't willing to douse that for fear that it would undermine the confidence of her troops.

Voicing a dozen screams and snarls at once, a fiend or an undead creature—at first glance, Jhesrhi couldn't tell which—scrambled out of the mouth of a branching tunnel. The thing was a head taller than she was, and almost as broad as it was high, with dozens of grimacing, mad-looking faces protruding from its slate-gray skin. The visages on its torso might have been flayed from adult men and women, while the ones running down its thick, knotted limbs dwindled in size until they were as small as the faces of newborn babies. It rushed at her with its hands outstretched.

She met the creature with a flare of flame that produced a kind of hollow pang in the core of her. The creature staggered and shrieked from its various mouths. Although covered in burns, it caught its balance and kept shambling forward. She prepared to cast another spell, but four of the stag warriors streamed past her, intercepted the thing, and drove their spears into it until it collapsed.

She supposed that was just as well, because the twinge of almost-pain had been a warning that she'd already expended a considerable amount of her power. She was likely to need the remainder for what was to come.

Two more turns brought her and her comrades into the tunnel behind whatever was putting the remnants of the rearguard to flight. She squinted, trying to make sense of the scene before her even though the figures in the foreground nearly blocked out everything behind them.

It looked like a force of undead had come up behind the rearguard as she and her companions had similarly come up behind it. Some of the revenants were witches, and they'd apparently panicked the rearguard by killing the Stag King and regaining mastery of the telthors he'd previously wrested from their control.

Jhesrhi was able to infer so much in just a heartbeat because, as she'd feared, the enemy had heard her and her stag men approaching, and the durthans had left off assailing the rearguard to turn and confront the newcomers. A witch in dark robes and a black mask that might be tarnished silver held the Stag King's antler weapon like a staff. A wise woman in red dangled his severed head. Their eyes gleamed like stars, and phantom wolves and badgers crouched at the witches' feet.

The durthans pointed their arcane weapons and recited incantations. The virulence of their curses swept down the passage in a wave of greenish phosphorescence. Patches of the stonework cracked and crumbled as it passed.

Jhesrhi rattled off words of defense. Her own power manifested as a burst of flame that met the oncoming shimmer and burned the poison out of it.

She struck back by calling for fire to leap up from the stones beneath her opponents. But the witch in the silver mask nullified the spell before it had even started to manifest with a contemptuous-looking flick of the antler-axe. The weapon was no doubt a powerful talisman.

The two sides traded attacks for a while, with neither able to penetrate the other's arcane defenses. Jhesrhi decided that she was a more powerful wizard than any of those standing against her, but the weight of their numbers offset that advantage.

While she dueled with her sister mages, spirit animals and undead pounced out of the archways in her vicinity, or simply lunged from solid stone. Stabbing with their spears and slashing with their swords, the stag warriors protected her from them.

Darts of ragged darkness pierced her cloak of fire, and a stab of chill made her clench and gasp. She tried to bring the ceiling down to bury the witches, but nothing happened. Not, she perceived, because the undead had countered the magic, but because the spell had simply fumbled its grip.

This failure was a warning that her current approach couldn't win the fight. Her foes were wearing her down. While still attacking and defending furiously, she tried to think about the situation as her friends might see it.

Aoth and Khouryn would say her current objective wasn't to destroy the creatures who were striving so doggedly to kill her. It was to keep the force they commanded from punching through what little was left of the rearguard and taking the Rashemi by surprise. And Gaedynn, grinning his crooked grin, would tell her that when neither skill nor strength could prevail, it was time to bluff.

Jhesrhi did her best to arrange her mouth into a convincing sneer, like a cruel goddess in mortal disguise

who'd tired of toying with her puny opponents and was ready to demonstrate the full measure of her power. She made her corona of flame burn brighter, cast fire before her in a continuous, roaring flare, and marched forward.

Advancing into the teeth of the enemies' curses made it even harder to blunt and deflect their force. Her limbs throbbed and cramped as more and more of the embodied malice slipped past her guard. But she didn't allow the pain to show in her face, make her break stride, or interrupt the steady outpouring of fire from the head of her staff. Instead, she shaped portions of the blaze into the semblance of furious griffons made of flame.

As she and her flare drew steadily closer, the telthors clustered around the witches. They cringed and peered up anxiously at their mistresses. And after another stride or two, the durthans began to fall prey to the same anxiety. Despite the masks and voluminous robes, Jhesrhi could see their fear in the way they tensed and balked.

The witch in the silver mask snarled, "This way!" She scrambled into a side passage, and her companions scurried after her. An instant after the last of them had disappeared, an enormous spider web burst into existence in the mouth of the tunnel, no doubt to prevent pursuit.

Panting, profoundly grateful and somewhat surprised the bluff had succeeded, Jhesrhi allowed her flare to gutter out. She leaned on her staff and, with an aching, trembling arm that felt almost too heavy to lift, waved the stag warriors on to attack the lesser undead still trying to cut and claw their way into the glabrezu's crypt.

* * * * *

Vandar had given himself over so utterly to rage that it was like the feeling was the living creature, and he, just a weapon in his grip. And that was fortunate. It kept him cutting, lunging, leaping, and dodging, when by all rights,

his limbs should have been feeble and slow with exhaustion. It kept him attacking past the point where a sensible man might have succumbed to futility and despair.

Yet despite his fury, a part of him noticed as his most formidable allies dropped out of the struggle. At the start, while he and his brothers had assailed the glabrezu with swords, axes, and spears, the outlanders had seared it with thunderbolts, flame, and shafts of burning light. But those blasts had stopped coming. Unable to divert his attention from the fiend, Vandar didn't know why. He wondered if the glabrezu's magic had killed Aoth, Jhesrhi, and Cera, too.

Whatever had become of them, it was his fight—his and the Griffon Lodge's. And despite the evidence of the pulped and dismembered Rashemi bodies scattered about the floor, Vandar still believed they could win it. Surely the enchantments in the red sword could kill the giant, but not as long as it was only cutting up the creature's extremities. He knew he had to find a way to reach its vitals.

He shouted to attract its attention and rushed at its right foot. It struck at him like he'd hoped it would, but not in the way he had wanted. Instead it bellowed a word of power. The magic stabbed pain through the core of him and made blood stream from his nose.

He snarled the pain away and lunged again. Then, as he'd hoped, a pair of huge pincers plunged down from on high to catch him and snip him to pieces. He jerked himself out of the way, and when the demon started to pull its extremity back, he sprang and wrapped his arms around the nearer of the claws.

The sharp edges cut him, and if the demon simply snapped its pincers shut, it would shear his arms off. But he'd taken it by surprise, and instead it completed the action it had initially intended. It lifted its claws back into the air, and him along with them.

The glabrezu started to close its pincers, but, riding the rage, Vandar was a hair too quick for it. He heaved and

swung himself onto the top of the claw, where he was still only an instant away from death. The fiend needed only to flip its arm to toss him up and catch him in its pincers or to hurl him across the vault to smash against the wall. But before it could do either, the beserker stood up and leaped at its chest.

The red sword drove into the glabrezu's burned, blackened flesh almost up to the hilt. For an instant, Vandar hung from the weapon like a mountaineer hanging from a piton. Then his weight pulled it sliding out of the wound.

He snatched frantically with his off hand and caught hold of a tuft of long, coarse hair that his spellcaster allies hadn't burned away. Dangling from that, he managed another thrust, then sensed—or maybe it was the red sword perceiving it—immense pincers reaching from behind him to pick him off his perch like a nit.

But the claws never closed on him. Instead, with a seeming slowness that reminded him of the start of an avalanche, the demon crumpled to its knees. Screeching, his lodge brothers scrambled to stab and cut at the lower part of its torso.

* * * * *

Trying to control his breathing, Aoth knew he was tiring and his undead opponent wasn't. He needed to end the confrontation. He let his target drop a little to invite a cut in the high line.

The blaspheme obliged, or at least it seemed to. But as Aoth shifted to avoid the blow, he saw it was only a feint. The true attack had looped low to slice his leg out from underneath him.

Because his shield was on the wrong side of his body, he had to parry the attack with his spear. Shouting a word of defense, he stopped the life-drinking weapon a finger-length

short of his flesh, although the clanging impact jolted his arm all the way up to the shoulder.

He set his spear ablaze with chaotic force and thrust at the blaspheme's flank. The point split the creature's mail shirt and pierced the gray, ridged skin inside.

But at the same moment, the blaspheme cut and caught the side of Aoth's head. His helmet clanked, and, stunned, staggering, he reeled off balance.

Frantically, he struggled to prepare for what was coming next. Swaying, he was actually recovering his equilibrium, and shifting his targe and sword into a proper guard, but oh so sluggishly, compared to the speed with which the blaspheme was presenting its blade.

But as the undead warrior made a horizontal cut, one of the ice trolls it had led into the vault lunged between it and Aoth. Intent on closing with some Rashemi or stag man, it apparently didn't notice it was rushing right into the middle of somebody else's fight.

The greatsword bit deep, and the troll collapsed, its flesh shriveling. The blaspheme yanked on the hilt of its weapon to free it from the corpse.

By the Luckmaiden's grace, it took a moment. Time enough for Aoth's thoughts to snap back into focus and for him to rattle off a spell.

Nearly as long as the blaspheme's weapon, a blade made of blue phosphorescence shimmered into being. It flew at the undead and cut at it. It parried, and the greatsword rang.

Fence with that for a while, thought Aoth. Meanwhile, he'd take the blaspheme apart with further spells.

But as he took a breath to begin, the patchwork warrior snarled a single word. Aoth had never heard it before, but the charge of power it carried set his teeth on edge and made his battered head throb anew. It also prompted the corpse of the ice troll to make a grab for his ankle.

Aoth barely managed to jump away. The reanimated ice troll heaved itself up off the floor.

All right, he thought, it's a race. I need to get rid of you before the blaspheme finds a way to get rid of my flying sword.

Suddenly, a disembodied female voice sounded across the vault, magic making it audible despite the roar of combat. "Uramar!" it called. "Fall back! Everyone, fall back!"

Still defending himself against the sword of light, the blaspheme started to do precisely that, and its troops with it. It occurred to Aoth that a prudent man might be glad to let it go. But he was certain that the blaspheme was a leader—maybe *the* leader—of the undead conspiracy threatening Rashemen. He set about stabbing and burning the ice troll out of his way as quickly as he could.

Unfortunately, it took a few heartbeats, and after that, he found himself facing clanking, steaming boarlike constructs of articulated steel and brass—products of Raumathari sorcery, probably—that the enemy had deployed to recover their retreat. Once he and his allies destroyed those, the vault was theirs, but the blaspheme had long gone.

T H I R T E E N

As previously planned, the surviving leaders of the defense assembled in a vault two levels deeper than the one they'd just conceded to the attackers. A number of their weary followers had crowded into the chamber with its intricate bas-reliefs of demons and damned souls crawling over and over one another, and more were stumbling in by the moment. But Nyevarra and her peers had claimed a little side crypt for their exclusive use, so they could talk privately.

As she'd so often seen him, Uramar stood staring at nothing and occasionally whispered to himself. Dark blood, or something akin to it, oozed from the slash in his torso; and despite the gravity of the current situation, she found herself wondering how that gelid ichor tasted. Would it poison her or exalt her in ways the blood of the living never could? Of late, sleeping away the time when the sun shone in the sky, she'd been having ecstatic dreams and terrifying nightmares—sometimes it was hard to tell which were which—about what might happen if he'd allow her to drink her fill of ekolid blood ...

She realized Pevkalondra was staring at her. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I asked," said the ghoul with an edge in her voice, "if you were absolutely certain we were beaten." The pearl in her eye socket glimmered in a manner suggestive of a tic, and the tiny silver scorpions crawling in the folds of her robe made a tiny rustling. No living person would have been able to hear them, but a vampire could.

The Raumviran's question, and the implication of cowardice it carried, drove thoughts of exotic blood from Nyevarra's mind. "Of course!" she snapped. "Once I was out of the thick of it, I could see the whole battle in a way others couldn't. And yes, we killed the Stag King"—or rather, she had, she and the trap she'd set, so how dare anyone doubt her courage or her judgment, either? "But nothing else was going as we had hoped. The enemy had destroyed Falconer and the glabrezu, too."

And the blonde witch had seemed on the verge of burning her and her sister durthans to ash. Although in retrospect, Nyevarra realized, there was reason to question whether the bitch truly had possessed the power. Maybe Nyevarra *had* given up on that particular part of the struggle too quickly. But she would rather have jammed a hawthorn stake into her own heart than admit it.

Pevkalondra spat charcoal-colored sludge. "If I had thought the battle hinged on filthy Nars and their pets," she said, "I wouldn't have agreed to help fight it in the first place."

Nyevarra sneered and felt her fangs lengthening. "If I were you, I'd keep my voice down," she said. "There are Nars just outside. Many more than there are Raumvirans."

"I don't fear them or barbarian witches, either," the ghoul said.

Nyevarra took a firmer grip on her new antler weapon. But before it could come to a fight, Uramar roused with a jerk,

and his mismatched eyes widened at the display of burgeoning hostility. "Enough!" he said.

Pevkalondra scowled to the extent that her shriveled, flaking face was capable of expression. "I don't care if your Nars and durthans outnumber me a thousand to one," she said. "I will have respect."

Uramar hesitated before replying, almost as if someone was whispering the proper response in his ear. "You *do* have it," he said. "If it seemed otherwise, it's simply because we undead have a ... fierceness in us. And when things aren't going well, it can even make us lash out at one another."

"Well, it's too bad your leman here wasn't feeling a little more fierce upstairs, the ghoul said. "Then perhaps things would be going better."

"I was in the midst of the fighting," Nyevarra said. "Where were you? Directing your constructs from a safe distance, I believe."

"Because that's an effective way to kill the enemy," Pevkalondra replied. "As opposed to giving the order to run away."

"Please," Uramar said through gritted teeth. "No more bickering. Lady Pevkalondra, I understand your frustration. I thought we were going to win, too. We should have. But luck wasn't with us, and I'm satisfied that Nyevarra made the right decision. I promise you that when the time is right, we'll take revenge for this defeat."

Pevkalondra spat again. "But for now, we set our puppets dancing and disappear," she said.

"Yes," the blaspheme said. "So let's get to it, and deploy those who are staying behind in such a way that the enemy will pay a price for the privilege of hunting us." For if their counterfeits went down too easily, it could give the game away.

* * * * *

Aoth turned back to Cera just in time to see blood flow from under the stained linen bandages wrapped around her brow. Cursing, she pressed her hand against the dressing.

“Do you need help?” he asked.

She snorted. “What kind of a healer would I be if I didn’t know how to apply pressure to a cut?” she said, cocking her head. She studied him, and her expression softened. “It’s nothing, I promise.”

But you *almost* lost your eyes, he thought, and, maybe partly because he himself had once been blind, the thought appalled him. She was right, though, there was no point fussing about it, especially when so many of their allies had fared far worse.

“Fair enough,” he said. “Is your magic coming back?”

“Trickling back,” she said. “I’ll start helping those who are hurt the worst as soon as I can.”

“Good. And I need to do my own work,” he said as he hugged her, and their armor clinked together.

Aoth made his way across the vault. Corpses—most conspicuously, the gigantic, burned-smelling carcass of the glabrezu—littered the floor. Berserkers sat huddled and shivering, waiting for the sickness that followed their fury to run its course. Meanwhile, stag warriors guarded the arches leading to the tunnels. Jhesrhi had attended to that. Apparently the degenerate fey were taking their orders from her.

Aoth wondered what they thought they recognized in her, and what the durthans she’d put to flight imagined they’d perceived. He told himself they were merely overreacting to the fire flowing inside her. With his spellscarred eyes, he could see it, too, but it didn’t mean anything beyond the obvious. Although, of course, the obvious was strange enough.

When she saw him coming, Jhesrhi gave him a nod. “Is your magic coming back?” she asked.

"The question of the moment," he said, smiling. "Yes, and what about yours?"

"Yes," she said, returning his question with a quick smile. "I take it we're going to need it."

"I *hope* you are," Vandar said.

Aoth turned to face the man who'd come up behind him. Though he looked as spent and as shaky as any of his lodge brothers—he was leaning on the red spear like an old man leaning on a staff—Vandar's eyes glared, and his lips were twisted in a sneer.

"What does that mean?" asked Aoth.

"I thought the glabrezu had killed both of you," the Rashemi said. "But now I see that you just gave up on trying to kill it."

Aoth felt a stab of anger and took a long breath to quell it. "Fighting the demon was important," he replied. "But other things were happening that were just as important, and Jhesrhi and I—and Cera—had to go and deal with them. We didn't *want* to leave you berserkers to handle the glabrezu by yourselves, but it was necessary."

Vandar grunted. "Whatever you say," he said. "I—I mean, my brothers and I—managed to kill the thing without you. What I want to know now is why we're dawdling. We need to get after the enemy to crush them once and for all."

"Of course," Aoth said, "I agree with you. And I mean to give chase as soon as we're able. But we've had this talk before. You don't want to lead your brothers into more fighting before they're ready."

"No," said Vandar. "But what if the durthans are getting away?"

"We have a way of checking on that, remember?" said Aoth. "I'll do it now." He reached out to Jet, and, through the familiar's eyes, saw the night sky. Selûne was rising in the east and trailing her haze of shimmering tears behind her. Fresh white snowflakes drifted on the frigid, moaning wind.

There's still nobody coming up out of any tunnels, said Jet. You should have taken me along with you. You could have used me when the patchwork man was tearing you apart.

You may be right, but it's too late now. Stay on watch.

I will. But I'm going to kill a wild hog, too. I saw some awhile ago, and I'm hungry.

Aoth fixed his gaze on Vandar. "Jet says there's no sign of undead and such aboveground," he said." So they must still be down here with us." He smiled. "Come on, relax. Surely the master of the Griffon Lodge trusts the word of his totem."

Vandar didn't smile back, but said, "Be ready as soon as you can." Then he turned and strode off toward some of his lodge brothers.

"I don't like this," Jhesrhi said. "He was always headstrong and touchy, and he never liked you much. But now he's ... different."

"I agree," said Aoth, "and I don't like it, either. But in spite of everything, we've got the foe on the run. Let's finish this, collect our reward, and go home to the Brotherhood."

* * * * *

Dai Shan stood at the bow of the *Storm of Vengeance* and gazed out at the vague black face of the benighted land below. It was an interesting sight, simultaneously majestic and mysterious, but it still afforded no sign of the Fortress of the Half-Demon.

Leaning on the rail beside him, Mario Bez said, "We're almost there."

"Are you sure?" Dai Shan asked.

The sellsword arched an eyebrow.

Dai Shan bowed. "A thousand apologies, most sagacious of navigators," he added. "Of course you are."

"Right," said the captain. "And because I am, it's time for you to do some more spirit traveling and figure out what

we're going to find when we arrive."

Inwardly, the Shou sighed. Perhaps it had been a mistake to let Bez know that he in any sense possessed that capability. Certainly there was an element of risk attendant upon entering a trance in the mercenary's presence. What if Bez had inferred that, his assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, Dai Shan still intended to claim the wild griffons for himself? What if the Halruaan decided to take advantage of a rival's diminished capacity by sticking his rapier in him or tossing him over the side? It was, after all, what Dai Shan might well have done in Bez's place.

But only after said rival had outlived his usefulness. Dai Shan hadn't, and he judged that his companion was shrewd enough to realize it.

So he said, "I have every confidence that your timing is impeccable, my valiant ally, and it will be my privilege to glean whatever information I can."

He moved to the center of the forecastle, sat down on the deck with his legs crossed, closed his eyes, and breathed slowly and deeply. When he felt centered, he reached out to the shadow that, tendays before, he'd cast to spy on the Griffon Lodge. Unless something had happened to it, it had followed the berserkers north to the Fortress of the Half-Demon and was stalking them still.

Yes. It still existed. He could feel the ache of emptiness, the strange mix of malice, cunning, and dullness, and the absolute need to serve him that passed for its mind. He told it to give up everything it had and was, identity and existence themselves, and become him.

Perhaps the shadow resisted or regretted, but if so, only for an instant. Then it was gone, and Dai Shan stood in its place.

Of course, he was still sitting in the bow of the *Storm* as well. But for the moment, the original Dai Shan was content to empty his mind and vicariously experience what his counterpart experienced.

The active Dai Shan found himself in a tunnel whose darkness was, of course, no impediment to his sight. Peering about to make certain no one was in his immediate vicinity, he inferred that he was in the notorious tangle of dungeons beneath the Fortress of the Half-Demon. Off in the distance, the wavering yellow lights of torches moved to and fro, men called out to one another, and, to his surprise, sleigh bells, or something like them, chimed.

He surmised that Aoth Fezim, Vandar Cherlinka, and their allies must have won an initial battle with Falconer, his fellow undead, and their servants. That seemed to be the only way the living humans could have gained access to the vaults. But what else was happening?

There was one way to find out, and Dai Shan supposed he needed to get on with it before the impermanent incarnation of himself ran out of life. He whispered a charm, and a cool tingle ran over his skin as he became invisible. Then he skulked toward the nearest source of torchlight.

Keeping a safe distance, he watched creatures like gaunt stags that walked on two legs and fought with weapons. They destroyed a steel bull that snorted jets of scalding steam from its nostrils. The bells bound to the warriors' antlers made the jingling he'd been hearing.

From there, he skulked on to a spot where a dozen howling, screeching Rashemi had cornered a durthan and some goblins and were hacking them to bits. The goblins screamed for the masked witch to cast a spell, but she didn't, not even when the berserkers cut her down in her turn. Perhaps she'd already expended all her power.

Such scenes gave Dai Shan more insight into the situation unfolding all around him. Since there was still fighting going on, it might be premature to call the attackers victorious, but their victory appeared inevitable. They were hunting their foes and driving them before them, deeper and deeper into the vaults.

And where was Falconer? Destroyed? Trapped? Escaped via some secret exit? It was impossible to say.

But perhaps it didn't matter. It scarcely seemed like a propitious moment to make a stand with the undead. No, if Dai Shan revealed himself at all, it had better be as the honest merchant who'd promised to help save Rashemen. Yet there didn't seem to be much point in announcing himself in that guise, either. The attackers didn't need his help and were unlikely to welcome a competitor trying to attach himself to them at the moment of their triumph. So he simply renewed his shroud of invisibility and prowled onward. He might as well learn everything he could.

He headed for the echoing shouts and clamor of what sounded like a nearby skirmish. But before he reached it, he spotted an archway capped with three relatively inconspicuous vertical notches like the ones he himself had chiseled beneath the Iron Lord's castle. But something about those grooves looked different.

Well, no, actually not. They *looked* identical, but they *felt* different. Dai Shan was at a loss to account for it until he remembered he wasn't his normal self. Rather, he was a shadow reshaped into human form, and some such phantoms possessed modes of perception mortals didn't: tropisms and instincts that enabled them to fix on the energies of life and undeath.

He was still trying to guess what it all meant when he heard hushed but urgent voices whispering down the passageway. Averse to trusting magic alone to hide him at close quarters, he retreated into the mouth of a branching tunnel.

Radiating an unnatural chill and a sickening feeling of wrongness, the blurry, wavering, and all but faceless form of a ghost came into view. Dai Shan couldn't quite tell if it was striding, flying, or moving in some even stranger way. The thought of looking closely enough to figure it out made his stomach churn.

With many a glance back over their shoulders, a trio of masked, hooded durthans scurried after their spectral guide. Their flickering, semitransparent familiars hurried with them: a peregrine, a wildcat, and a swarm of bees.

Orienting on the archway with the carving, the ghost extended three wispy fingers and flicked his hand in a downward motion, as if it was scratching similar marks on the air. The space beyond the doorway changed.

It was still a tunnel, but it forked just a few strides in, whereas before, there had only been one passage receding until a dogleg bent it out of sight.

Nor was that the only change. Since there were no lights shining anywhere nearby, it mocked common sense to suggest that the passage was blacker than it had been before. Yet it was. The *idea*, the *essence* of darkness crawled and festered there so thickly that even Dai Shan's magically enhanced sight had difficulty making out the details of the morbid carvings that adorned the walls in bewildering profusion.

The ghost led its charges through the arch and repeated the cat-scratch gesture. As quickly as it had changed before, the passage reverted to its original condition, and those who had entered it disappeared.

Dai Shan gave his head a tiny shake. When he'd wondered if Falconer and his peers might have a secret means of escape, he'd been wiser than he knew. And such being the case, perhaps he could accomplish something more—much more!—than mere reconnaissance, if only he didn't run out of time.

He waited another moment, making sure that the ghost and the witches weren't coming back. Then he approached the arch and tried the scratching motion for himself.

* * * * *

Across the myriad nightmare worlds that made up the Abyss, manes were the lowest form of demon. They were slaves or prey to all the others, waddling, bloated child-sized things with maggots squirming in their open sores. Aoth never beheld one without recalling how Szass Tam had disposed of Nevron by turning him into a mane, a supremely ignominious end for Thay's preeminent master of fiends.

Maybe it was that flicker of memory that slowed his reactions, for by the time he had aimed his spear, Jhesrhi was already hurling bright yellow flame from her staff. Wreathed in fire like the wizard herself, the several tanar'ri fell down, screaming and writhing.

Aoth supposed that left him to account for the Nar demonbinder who'd summoned the creatures. Taking care not to trip over a burning mane, or let one roll and flounder into him, he rushed the undead figure with the staff in its flaking, tattooed hands and the big round iron amulet dangling from its withered neck. Cera and a couple of the stag warriors raced after him.

Somewhat to Aoth's surprise, the Nar didn't try to call up a new fiend. It simply swung its staff in a sweeping blow instead. Aoth simultaneously blocked with his targe, charged his spear with lightning, and thrust it into the walking corpse's chest. The resulting flash and bang tore its torso apart, and it fell backward. The stag warriors hacked at it anyway. They'd learned that undead and trolls sometimes needed a lot of killing.

Still, that one was rather clearly finished. Cera, the front of her bandages stained rusty brown, peered down at the remains. Breathing hard, she said, "That was pretty easy."

Aoth frowned. "It was, wasn't it?" he said. And after all the hard fighting they'd done to get so far, he supposed he should be grateful. Still, something about it nagged at him, and he tried to figure out what.

A sudden baritone voice speaking with a cultured Shou accent distracted him from his pondering. "Captain Fezim,"

it said.

Surprised, Aoth pivoted to see Dai Shan advancing into the golden glow of Cera's conjured sunlight. Clad in his customary green coat, the little merchant was so immaculately groomed that he would have cut a strange figure on any battleground, let alone in a warren infested with the vilest creatures in Rashemen.

Nor were his cleanliness and neatness the strangest things about his sudden appearance. "What are you doing here?" Aoth demanded.

The Shou bowed. "The shrewd war mage cuts to the heart of the matter as incisively as I would have expected," he said. "As you may recall, I too possess some knowledge of the occult arts. My explorations revealed that the hathrans' quest had led you and your dauntless allies to the Fortress of the Half-Demon. So naturally, since the undertaking is mine as well, I rushed here by sorcerous means to assist however I can."

Aoth snorted and said, "In other words, to stake your claim to at least a couple griffons if you possibly can."

Dai Shan turned up his well-tended hands. "Sympathetic as I am to the difficulties of our Rashemi hosts, I confess that my motives aren't *entirely* altruistic," he said. "Perhaps, if pressed, even the most valorous of mercenaries might admit the same."

"Fair enough," said Aoth. "But you're too late to dip your mug in this particular barrel. We don't need you. It's all over but the cleanup."

"Then I congratulate you," said Dai Shan. "Still, hearing that matters have advanced as far as you say, I find myself puzzled over the particular group of undead I sighted proceeding down a certain passage. From their demeanor no less than their gear, I assumed them to be powerful creatures of high rank. Enemies one would wish to destroy before proclaiming the current menace ended for good and all."

“Did you see a big thing that looked stitched together from pieces of different bodies?” Cera asked. “Or a witch in a tarnished silver mask? She would have been carrying a staff with antlers on the end.”

Dai Shan gave a little nod. “In fact, wise daughter of the sun,” he said, “that’s exactly whom I saw. Those two and three others.”

Aoth’s mouth tightened. He didn’t much fancy partnering up with such a glib little eel, but he’d fought alongside worse in his time. “If you lead us to the creatures, *maybe* we can spare you a griffon or two,” he said. “Failing that, we’ll pay you somehow.”

“So be it,” replied the Shou. “And now that we’ve negotiated that, may I recommend haste? We wouldn’t want the foe to stray too far from the location where I observed them.”

“One moment,” Jhesrhi said. Extinguishing her mantle of flame, she stepped to the wall and placed her fingertips against it. Aoth knew she was talking to the stone all around them, finding out where the other squads were and how they were faring.

Jhesrhi turned back around. “Everything seems to be under control,” she said.

“Good,” Aoth replied, looking at Dai Shan. “Now we can go.”

The Shou led them along a twisting route through vaults and passages that echoed with the cries and clatter of conflict. Watching for signs of trouble, Aoth had to admire the ease with which Dai Shan negotiated the labyrinth, assuming the trader wasn’t lost.

With their bells silenced, and their cloven hooves clicking on the floor, eight stag warriors paced in a line behind their human comrades. Aoth wondered how much they understood what was happening and decided he’d likely never know. In their mute inscrutability, they seemed emblematic of the entire fey- and spirit-ridden country.

Another turn brought an archway into view and drove such reflections from his mind as he grunted in surprise.

Dai Shan looked back at him. "Is something wrong, intrepid captain?" he asked.

"Not wrong," said Aoth, "but interesting. Cera and I saw three notches just like that cut at the top of an arch in the tomb back in the sacred grove."

"The same crypts," Dai Shan said, "from which, you said, the durthans and werewolves seemingly emerged even though you'd established they were empty."

"Yes," replied Aoth.

"Well, it gratifies me to be in a position to solve that particular puzzle for you," said the Shou. "Watch the arch while I recite the words I heard the scarred creature say. 'In the name of the Vaunted, the Staff-Bearer, the Lord of the Forsaken Crypt, open.' "

The space beyond the opening changed. What had been one passage until it doglegged out of sight divided into two. What had been featureless walls suddenly sported intricate carvings like fungus grown in an instant: a bewildering hodgepodge of skulls, skeletons, weeping mourners, flowers, wreaths, sunsets, and souls standing before their gods for judgment. Moreover, a nasty-looking darkness resisted the illumination of Cera's conjured sunlight. It reminded Aoth of Gaedynn and Jhesrhi's description of the Shadowfell, and he suspected that was exactly what he was looking at. Or, if not Shadow itself, a demiplane derived from it.

The stag men shied at the transformation, and Jhesrhi turned to calm them. Cera grinned at Aoth. "So you see *everything*, do you?" she said.

"Once in a while," he replied, trying to sound vexed so she'd enjoy her teasing more. "There truly isn't anything that *any* pair of eyes could see. This was one of those occasions."

"If you say so, my love," she said. "If you say so."

"If my fearless companions are ready," Dai Shan said, "I don't imagine the gate will stay open forever."

"Probably not," Aoth said. Spear at the ready, he prowled forward, while Dai Shan stepped aside and relinquished the lead. Aoth supposed that was fair enough. The merchant had done his job, and it was time for the soldiers to do theirs.

As soon as he stepped over the threshold, he felt an absence. He'd lost contact with Jet just as he had upon entering the Feywild. It was proof that he and his comrades truly were intruding on another level of reality.

Nor was that the only indication. It was colder than it had been outside the arch. Cera murmured a prayer that infused the light that followed her like a faithful hound with warmth. But the surrounding gloom immediately started leeching both the heat and the radiance away. She was going to have to keep investing power in the enchantment if she wanted it to last.

It was one more good reason to find and destroy the enemy leaders quickly. Aoth started forward, then heard a jangle of bells. He turned to see what had agitated the stag warriors.

As Dai Shan had predicted, the arch behind them had changed again. Instead of connecting to the tunnel they'd just left, it framed a straight length of passageway also shrouded in murk and decorated with funerary carvings. Fortunately, though, their side of the arch had its own three notches to mark it as a doorway back to the mortal world. Aoth and his comrades shouldn't have any trouble identifying it once their business was through.

Jhesrhi calmed the stag men once again. They all stalked onward through echoing spaces that proved to be at least as labyrinthine as the ones that truly lay under the fortress. Sarcophagi rested on daises or stood on end in niches. Urns reposed on shelves. The jumbles of mournful carvings on the walls sometimes yielded to more ordered spaces resembling the facades of tombs. Occasionally, the way widened out to

accommodate rows of headstones, a freestanding mausoleum, or even an entire graveyard under a vaulted ceiling. The place was like a fever dream of interment.

And its vastness was a problem. Eventually Cera stated what everyone had surely started to realize. "There are too many alleys running off in all directions," she said. "The undead could have gone anywhere."

"Can you track them?" Aoth asked, of her and Jhesrhi, too.

"Maybe," Cera said. "I can ask the Keeper where they went."

"And I can talk to the stone and the air," Jhesrhi said.

Aoth left them to it. Meanwhile, he prowled about, peering and listening, trying to catch any sign of their quarry or of any lurking threat native to the halls. Presumably doing the same, the stag men likewise paced the twilight perimeter where Cera's radiance began to fail.

Dai Shan, however, ventured farther. Aoth remembered the means by which the Shou had made a fool of Folcoerr Dulsær and decided he was the sort of mage who felt at home in the dark. Yet it wouldn't necessarily help him if a wraith or demon pounced out at him from cover.

But nothing did. Dai Shan turned and came trotting back. For once, his imperturbable face betrayed a hint of excitement. "Brave captain," he said, "come and see."

Aoth glanced back at Cera and Jhesrhi, each still intent on her labors, making sure they were all right. He followed Dai Shan into the gloom.

The Shou led him around a corner to an arch flanked by black marble statues of sphinxes sitting on their haunches. Incised on the pointed capstone were three grooves.

"Do you see?" Dai Shan asked.

"Yes," said Aoth. "Presumably the enemy was making for a different doorway to leave this place. This may well—"

The view before him shifted. The arch still opened on a farrago of grim and sometimes bizarre stonework, but it was different stonework. A bas-relief of skeletal Kelemvor

enthroned and holding his scales had given way to a row of grimacing demonic heads sticking out of the wall like rainspouts. A sarcophagus big enough for a fomorian had become steps leading down to a small boat with an empty bed in the center, a craft perhaps destined to wait forever for someone to put a corpse onboard, set it ablaze, and shove it out onto the black water beyond the quay.

Aoth realized no one had spoken the words that had supposedly produced such a transformation before. Then he realized Dai Shan was standing a pace behind him.

As he started to turn, something slammed into his head. If not for his helmet, and a hundred years of experience in rolling with impacts he couldn't avoid, the blow might well have snapped his spine.

As it was, it stabbed pain through his neck and threw him off balance. He struggled to get his feet under him, while Dai Shan plowed into him like a wrestler intent on bulling his opponent out of the ring.

That's a mistake, thought Aoth. He moved his hands up on the haft of his spear and stabbed at the spot where Dai Shan's neck met his shoulder.

Somehow, Dai Shan sensed the attack coming. He let Aoth go and jerked backward. It saved his life, but he failed to avoid the stroke entirely. The spearhead raked across the front of his torso and gashed him.

"Give up," Aoth said. "You're unarmed and wounded. You can't win."

Dai Shan made a shallow bow. "Reluctant as I am to contradict such a perspicacious leader of men," he said, "it appears to me that I've already won. You may find it instructive to examine our surroundings."

Aoth risked a glance and discovered that when the Shou had tackled him, he'd shoved him to the other side of the arch. Worse—much worse—the view on the side where they'd started had altered, too. There was still a tomb-scape

there, but not the same one where he'd left Jhesrhi and Cera working their magic.

"Does the illustrious war mage understand now?" Dai Shan asked, the slightest of smiles upturning the corners of his mouth. "Lacking the true secret of the portals, you will wander here alone until you either succumb to thirst or attract the attention of something that resents trespassers. The sunlady, the elementalist, and those peculiar deer men are in essentially the same predicament, although they at least have one another for company."

"And I have you," said Aoth. "To cut on until you open the gate again."

The Shou inclined his head. "An eminently practical solution," he replied, "if only I were in every sense the true, unique Dai Shan. But alas, it isn't so. I'm merely a shadow, doomed to fade away no matter what, so neither torture nor murder worries me unduly."

"Then why even bother to attack me?" asked Aoth. "Why not just lure us in here, 'fade,' and leave us trapped?"

"Again, I congratulate you on the acuity of your mind," said the Shou. "That's an entirely sensible question. The answer is that I neither know all the qualities of this place nor the full capabilities of you and your allies. Pooling your resources, you, Jhesrhi Coldcreek, and Cera Eurthos might just have found a way out. The two ladies still might. But not you, mighty warrior, not alone, not when your particular system of wizardry revolves around blasting and smiting, not solving subtle conundrums of metaphysics. And ultimately, it's you who are my competitor for the griffons."

Aoth had the ghastly feeling that Dai Shan had just told him the truth in every respect. Yet it was possible he was bluffing, that he wasn't really going to melt away but was instead just waiting for a chance to escape.

And even if he wasn't, Aoth very much wanted to hurt him. He snarled a word of power, jabbed with his spear, and hurled darts of blue-green light from the point.

The missiles stabbed into Dai Shan's torso, and he stumbled back against the wall. Aoth lunged after him.

The darkness thickened and swirled around the Shou like a black whirlwind. Then he vanished.

Aoth suspected his foe had only shifted a short distance. He whirled, seeking him, and spotted him immediately. But before he could do anything about it, the gloom churned, and Dai Shan disappeared for a second time.

Aoth's battle instincts told him the merchant had jumped back to his original position. He pivoted just in time to catch a clanging snap kick on his targe. Spinning and leaping, Dai Shan instantly tried to kick over the top of the shield.

Aoth simultaneously shifted the targe to protect his face and thrust around the side of it. The stroke caught Dai Shan in midair and drove into his belly.

The Shou landed on his back. He tried to heave himself up off the floor, but the effort proved to be too much for him. He gave Aoth a little nod.

"It was a singular honor," Dai Shan whispered, "to watch such an illustrious man-at-arms ply his trade. Thank—"

The Shou disappeared, but it was different than before. The darkness hadn't stirred to help him whisk himself across space. Rather, he'd simply faded away as he'd said he would.

With him vanished any trace of vengeful satisfaction that Aoth might otherwise have felt. Because it *didn't* matter that he'd destroyed that particular manifestation of his rival's power. Dai Shan had outwitted and outmaneuvered him, and as a result, not only he but also Jhesrhi and Cera were in trouble.

Aoth comprehended all too well that he didn't know how to control the portals. Dai Shan had concealed the actual procedure. But just to make absolutely sure, he faced the arch and said, "In the name of the Vaunted, the Staff-Bearer, the Lord of the Hidden Crypt, open."

It didn't.

* * * * *

Feeling every bit as energized, as *angry*, as he had when he first descended into the tunnels, Vandar trotted in search of more enemies. The berserkers he'd chosen for his personal hunting party trotted after him. Just ahead on the left, an arch opened on a passage running off the main corridor at an oblique angle. It was an architectural feature the ancient Nars had evidently favored, at least for their dungeons, tombs, and conjuring chambers.

Something about the arch snagged Vandar's attention, although he had no idea what or why. Except for the three grooves carved at the top, it didn't look any different than the many other openings he'd passed.

Puzzled, he stopped and examined the arch. He still couldn't see anything special about it, and was about to move on when he realized that while he himself hadn't noticed anything, the red spear in his left hand and the crimson broadsword in his right one had. Making themselves felt in a manner all but indistinguishable from his own native intuition, the perceptions of the fey weapons had bled into his thoughts.

Frowning and struggling to understand them, he concentrated on the alien feelings. After a few moments he decided that the weapons themselves were unable to interpret what they were sensing. But because he was paying attention, just for an instant he heard Cera calling.

Or had he? Her voice sounded faint and faraway, and more than that, there was a not-quite-real quality to it, like it had only called in his memory or imagination.

Still, he answered. He shouted her name, but she didn't shout back. Whatever he'd heard, or thought he'd heard, there was nothing left of it. He waved one of his mystified torchbearers up to the archway. The wavering yellow glow of the brand didn't illuminate all that much of the branching

passage, but the way was empty as far down as Vandar could see.

He shook his head. If he tarried here long enough, would the fey weapons make sense of the mystery? If so, was that what he *should* do? If Cera was in danger—

A sickly green glow appeared in the gloom ahead, down the passage he'd been traversing before the arch attracted his attention. It was the telltale glimmer of some enchantment surrounding shadowy figures negotiating the intersection where Vandar's tunnel crossed another. The creature in the lead was big. It strode with a limp, and was carrying a greatsword.

Vandar caught his breath. He was all but certain he'd just seen the "patchwork man" or "blaspheme"—the hulking thing his outlander allies thought might well be the leader of all the undead durthans and Nars.

Vandar and his lodge brothers had already killed the giant demon upstairs, thereby winning that battle no matter what Aoth Fezim might claim. If they destroyed the patchwork man, too, then surely no one could deny they were the true saviors of Rashemen and deserved to claim the wild griffons for their own.

But Cera ...

With a scowl, Vandar put the sunlady out of his mind. He didn't know if she was really in trouble or somewhere down the seemingly deserted corridor beyond the archway at all. And even had he known, she was one of Aoth Fezim's allies, and Aoth was a Thayan and a mercenary. He was dishonorable enough to flout the will of the spirits themselves to steal the wild griffons just as he'd tried to snatch Vandar's spear. Dishonorable enough to abandon the brothers of the Griffon Lodge to fight the glabrezu by themselves, either out of cowardice or hope that the fiend would kill a rival. And, given that the ploy had failed, he was dishonorable enough to try to murder Vandar from the air, or so the guardian of the fey mound had warned.

Because Vandar *was* honorable, he would never have raised his hand against Aoth and his friends until they demonstrated beyond any possible doubt that they meant to play him false. But that didn't mean he was going to stand idly and uselessly in front of an empty passage while his destiny fled in another direction. He broke into a run, and his fellow berserkers charged behind him. In a moment, they'd left the archway behind.

* * * * *

Cera called Aoth's name again, and the sound echoed away into the darkness.

Jhesrhi felt a pang of irritation and strained to keep it from showing on her face, because Cera wasn't the veteran soldier. If anyone was to blame for Aoth's disappearance, it was Jhesrhi herself. If she'd kept him in sight, or reacted more quickly to the sounds of a struggle ...

She sighed. *If* was no more help than Cera's shouting.

"Stop yelling," she said.

"But—"

"If Aoth were going to answer, he would have done it already," she said.

Cera shook her head. "This is all my fault," she replied. "I told Dai Shan whom we were hunting. Then he fed it right back to us to lure us into this place."

"Probably," said Jhesrhi. "But lamenting the fact won't help us. We have to figure out what will."

Cera took a deep breath. "You're right," she replied. "When the two of them disappeared, you and I were trying to pick up the blaspheme's trail. I couldn't do it. Did you?"

"No."

"That's not surprising if he never really came in here in the first place. Let's try again, only this time, search for Aoth."

"All right."

With the stag warriors looking on, she and the sunlady moved back to the spots in which they had each chosen to work their magic.

Jhesrhi's jaw tightened as she rested her hand on the wall and reached for the consciousness inside. She loved communing with the elemental spirits of the mortal world. They were pure and simple—not maddeningly complicated and perverse like so many human beings—and they were nearly always friendly and glad to help her. In contrast, the powers of the place they were in, like those of the Shadowfell, were foul to the psychic touch, spiteful, and required coercion to do her bidding.

So it was coercion she applied, growling and rumbling words of power in one of the ponderous languages of Root Hold. The magic chipped and cracked the stone around her until finally, when it had had enough, it told her that it didn't know where Aoth or Dai Shan was. It took pleasure in her disappointment.

Maybe the cold, stale air knew what the stone didn't. Preparing to ask, Jhesrhi focused her will anew. Cera abandoned her murmuring chant and said, "I can't find them."

"Of course you can't," said a deep silky voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. "How can Amaunator shed his light on secrets in a place where the Yellow Sun never shines?"

As if to validate that statement, gloom smothered the glow Cera had conjured to light their way, not slowly as it had been doing all along, but as fast as a strong man strangling a kitten. With a jangling of bells, the stag warriors leveled their weapons and pivoted this way and that. Jhesrhi called flame from the core of her and concentrated its essence in the head of her staff.

And something awful came out of the dark.

F O U R T E E N

With their torches burning and their racing feet thumping the floor, Vandar and his lodge brothers had little hope of taking the patchwork man and his minions by surprise. When they drew near, he confirmed that it wasn't going to happen. The walking dead and their haze of green phosphorescence had stopped and turned to make a stand at a spot where the corridor widened out into a pentagonal chamber.

Despite running flat out, Vandar managed a screech, and some of his comrades did, too. As he sprinted to close the remaining distance, he watched for one of the slumped, decaying figures before him to aim a wand and hurl a burst of frost or blighting shadow. But none of them did. Maybe the witches and such had already exhausted their powers, he thought.

Vandar threw the red spear, and it plunged through the patchwork's man's mail and into his chest. Without a twitch or the slightest change of expression, the hulking undead grabbed the shaft of the weapon, jerked it free, and dropped it clanging onto the floor.

By that time, Vandar was close enough to see the mismatched eyes Aoth had mentioned: one glimmering yellow, the other dull, weeping slime, and possibly blind. The scars crisscrossing the blaspheme's skin were oozing, too, as if the joins had never closed properly.

As Vandar continued to race toward the undead, the blaspheme's greatsword whirled in a low cut. Vandar threw himself on the floor and rolled to avoid the stroke. The patchwork man pivoted, trying for a second slash, but Vandar was too quick for him. He simultaneously scrambled up and cut at the undead creature's wrist.

The crimson blade bit deep, and the greatsword wobbled in the patchwork man's grip. Maybe he could shrug off a spear thrust to the torso, but he shouldn't be able to manage his heavy two-handed weapon as well with ripped muscles and severed tendons.

Vandar suddenly sensed danger at his back—or maybe the red sword sensed it for him. He whirled to find a masked, hooded durthan lunging at him with her clawed gray hands outstretched. She was already too close for a sword cut, so he punched instead. The blow hurled her back into the zombie rushing up behind her.

His defense only stopped them momentarily, but in that moment, Vandar's brothers caught up with him. They hurled themselves at the lesser undead and freed him to concentrate on the patchwork man.

As he spun back around, the greatsword swept down at his head. He wrenched himself aside and cut at the blaspheme's undamaged wrist. Again, the red sword cut deep.

Even after that, the patchwork man somehow kept his grip on the greatsword's hilt. But he could barely aim his attacks, and his parries and recoveries were slow. Hating him, riding the rage, Vandar circled him and slashed him to pieces.

A couple of lesser undead survived their master, but only by a heartbeat or two. Then the warriors of the Griffon Lodge disposed of them as well.

* * * * *

Jet approached the *Storm of Vengeance* from high above, the safest and stealthiest way to do it. He wasn't sure of a hostile reception, but there was ample reason to be wary of Mario Bez and his crew. The Halruaan had the scruples of a hungry rat, he was Aoth's rival in the competition for the wild griffons, and his appearance at the Fortress of the Half-Demon was as unexpected and possibly as unfortunate as ...

Dai Shan? As a member of a more sensible species, Jet was largely immune to the feelings of incredulity and self-doubt that afflicted humankind. What he saw, he saw, and what he knew, he knew. But he found himself peering more closely at the elevated bow of the *Storm* to make sure the darkness wasn't playing tricks on him.

It wasn't, so he studied the skyship. His experience with any sort of ship was happily limited—like all griffons, he had little use for the sea—but he understood the danger of colliding with any part of the complex web of rigging and sails. The results could easily be fatal. It was helpful that Dai Shan was at the end of the vessel rather than somewhere in the middle, but it didn't eliminate the hazard entirely.

Jet decided on the trajectory he wanted and wheeled to the start of it. Then he furled his wings and dived.

Despite the darkness, one of the crew saw him swooping in and shouted. But no one had time to react to the cry. An instant later, Jet's talons closed on Dai Shan where he stood peering down at the benighted stronghold with Bez. He jerked the merchant off his feet and carried him over the far rail.

Beating his wings to regain the high air, the griffon rasped, "Where is Captain Fezim?"

Dai Shan took a moment to reply. Maybe he needed to get past the shock of what had so abruptly befallen him. "With all respect, majestic commander of the skies," he eventually said, "how would I know? I've only just arrived."

Jet closed his talons tightly enough that Dai Shan gasped and stiffened. "Don't lie to me," the griffon said. "Aoth and I are linked mind to mind. I saw you take him and the others through the gate into Shadow. He's still gone, but somehow, you're here. Tell me what happened."

"It's fairly involved. I fear we may not have time."

"Stop stalling! Bez can't help you now!"

"Nor am I certain that doing so is foremost in his mind. If my mighty captor can climb or distance himself from the ship anymore quickly, I respectfully advise it."

* * * * *

Mario Bez considered himself keen of eye and quick of mind. Still, though the huge black griffon had swooped within an arm's reach of him, he'd barely glimpsed it as it snatched up and carried off Dai Shan.

Still, a glimpse had sufficed, and fortunately, given that the *Storm* had reached her destination, all hands were at their battle stations. "Ready the catapults and ballistae!" he called.

The artillerymen scrambled to obey. Melemer made sure the team under his immediate supervision was performing as it should be, then leered up at the forecastle. "The griffon thinks we won't strike at it for fear of killing the Theskian, too," he called.

Bez smiled back at the little tiefling. "And it would be ungrateful of us. Dai Shan guided us here. He scouted the situation so we'd know what to do when we arrived. He claims to have rid us of Aoth Fezim, although he's hazy on the details. Still, we wouldn't want him to take it into his head to blackmail us with what he knows, and the Thayan's talking steed poses a similar threat. It could tattle on us, too. So, all things considered, I believe we should take advantage of a happy opportunity to solve two problems at once."

“Ready, Captain!” a ballista man called. Down the length of the vessel, other sellswords shouted the same.

“Lights!” called Bez.

Crossbows shot in all directions. The quarrels exploded into orbs of light that only drifted earthward slowly, like thistledown. For the moment, their silvery glow did a fair job of illuminating the sky around the *Storm*.

“Off the port bow,” shouted a crewman, “and three hands above the deck!”

Those teams who had a shot scurried to pivot their weapons and adjust the elevations.

“Not an easy shot,” Melemer said.

“We’ll make it,” Olthe growled. The battleguard stepped up to the tiefling’s catapult, rested her hand on the throwing arm, and chanted a prayer to Tempus. Smirking, Melemer whispered a spell of his own, and points of red light glimmered over the surface of the weapon.

“Kill the griffon!” shouted Bez.

The catapults and ballistae loosed a clanking, snapping volley, and the missiles turned into blazing thunderbolts and orbs of fire in midflight. Most fell well short, flew far wide, or both.

But the ball of flame from Melemer’s catapult hurtled at the mark. Plainly perceiving the danger, the black griffon lashed its wings and dodged out of the way.

Olthe brandished her axe and shouted, “Tempus!” Melemer smacked the palms of his hands onto his stubby horns, displayed the resulting bloody little punctures to the heavens, and snarled two rhyming words in some Abyssal tongue. Gripping the hilt of the rapier hanging at his side, Bez rattled off an incantation of his own, but more for form’s sake than because he expected any of the magic to accomplish anything. The griffon had simply evaded too deftly.

But the orb of fire veered in what was nearly a hairpin turn, a magical course correction so pronounced that,

despite decades spent practicing battle wizardry, Bez had never seen the like. There was always an element of chaos and uncertainty in magic, the more so when multiple spells worked in concert. And it appeared that the arcane and divine forces at play on the *Storm* had achieved an amazingly potent synergy.

Perhaps its power caught the griffon by surprise, too. The beast tried to dive and dodge again, but the luminous sphere hit it anyway. The missile exploded into a ragged, booming burst of yellow fire, and a burning mass tumbled out of the heart of the blast and plummeted toward the ground.

Momentarily forgetting she didn't like him, Olthe gave Melemer a clap on the shoulder. The buffet nearly knocked him off his feet.

* * * * *

Vandar roamed through the corpse-littered courtyard and the chambers adjacent to it, checking on his brothers. Despite the magic of his crimson weapons, which evidently, had some power to delay the onset of fatigue, he felt the same grinding exhaustion as the others. But as lodge master, it was his duty to offer praise, guidance, encouragement, jokes, or consolation as needed.

Too often, it was the last. The entire Griffon Lodge was a tight-knit fellowship, and nearly everyone had lost at least one close comrade. The society as a whole had lost half its initiates and all its more notable allies as well. Aoth, Jhesri, Jet, and the Stag King had all either perished or disappeared.

Vandar felt a pang of his own grief, or perhaps even guilt. His brothers had died because he had led them to the Fortress. And for all he knew, Cera and the other outlanders might conceivably have survived if he hadn't turned away when he heard her calling.

The red metal shaft of his spear warmed in his hand, and he realized such self-reproach was pointless. His fallen brothers had been warriors, and they'd died as they would have chosen, fighting to destroy a threat to Rashemen. They'd succeeded, too, and as a result, the lodge they'd loved would henceforth stand as high, or higher, than any in the land. Recruits would pour in to replenish its depleted ranks.

And as for the outlanders ... The mound guardian's prophecy said that, had they lived, they and Vandar were fated to be enemies. That being the case, wouldn't it be foolish to regret the manner of their passing? Wasn't it better that they'd died before they had had the chance to betray a comrade and so disgrace their names?

Remember the dead, but move on, he thought. Focus on getting his weary, wounded brothers home, claiming and taming the griffons, and building the lodge into a warrior fraternity whose fame would live forever.

Smiling, he stepped back out into the morning sunlight to organize the trek south. And then he faltered, because five stag warriors were waiting in front of the doorway. Their brown eyes fixed on him.

Vandar had been so busy seeing to the needs of his own people that he'd half forgotten the fey. It occurred to him that they might well feel demoralized and confused. They'd suffered heavy casualties just like the berserkers, and on top of that, they'd lost the lord and progenitor who had, until yesterday, given purpose and order to their lives.

"Uh ... hello," he said. "My brothers and I are grateful to you for fighting alongside us, and we mourn for your fallen comrades. And ... Well, plainly, our work is done now. The fight is over. So I suppose you should take whatever you want in the way of plunder and go back home. And know that we will always be your friends."

The stag warriors kept staring at him. They didn't understand a word he'd just blathered, and with no one left

who spoke Elvish, there was nobody to translate.

Vandar gestured to the open gate and the wide world outside. The stag men followed the sweep of his arm, but then just looked back at him.

He shook his head in perplexity. It occurred to him to wonder why they were interested in him in particular. What differentiated him from all the other humans? It might be that he was the one striding around giving instructions, but he suspected it was the fey weapons.

He lifted the red spear to display it. The stag warriors bobbed their heads and rang the bells in their antlers.

"All right," Vandar said. "Understand, I'm not commanding you to do this. You really are free to go home. But if you *want* to come with me—and my brothers—when we move out, you can."

And that was what the stag men did.

As everyone trudged southward through the snow, a cold wind blew at their backs. Vandar reflected that surely Yhelbruna would be able to communicate with the stag warriors. She could send them home.

Unless, of course, they truly didn't want to go. What if there was something in their natures that made them *need* a chieftain different than themselves, and they'd selected Vandar for the role?

He supposed that the lodge would have to make accommodations for them, and fetch their females and children to join them in Immilmar. Just think how feared and famous he and his brothers would be if they had griffons to ride into battle *and* a band of fey archers for allies!

He imagined that intriguing possibility for several strides before he felt a throb of warning from his spear and sword. A heartbeat later, one of the men behind him shouted.

Vandar turned. With her sails billowing and canvas wings spread, the *Storm of Vengeance* was flying out of the northeast like a dragon. The she-demon figurehead leered

down at the folk on the ground, as did the crimson skull on the flapping ensign.

Looking up from below, it was all but impossible to make out what the sellswords aboard the skyship were doing. But Vandar's every instinct screamed that they were attacking. That, and not Aoth and Jet striking at him from the air, was what the mound spirit's warning had portended.

In that moment of ghastly clarity, Vandar even understood exactly why it was happening. The Griffon Lodge and its allies had destroyed the undead threat to Rashemen. But if Mario Bez and his crew killed the victors, they could steal the credit and the prize for the victory.

Vandar cast about. There was nowhere on the rolling scrubland to take cover. The mercenaries had evidently hidden their ship until their prey had marched away from the relative safety of the fortress, then flown after them to catch them in the open.

And what could the exhausted warriors on the ground do about it? Men who'd been riding in litters or limping along using their spears for crutches struggled to stand on their own two feet. Others screeched hoarsely, struggling to raise the fury one more time, and hefted the javelins they surely realized could never reach the enemy in the sky. The stag men with their longbows might do a little better, but not enough for it to matter.

Vandar gripped his spear and the hilt of his sword. You're magical, he silently pleaded. With the wizards and the sunlady gone, you're the only magic we have left. Do something! Tell me what to do!

But the weapons didn't answer, at least not in any way he could perceive. And he realized that, powerful though they were, they couldn't grow wings on his back.

The *Storm of Vengeance* swooped in at an angle to the road, and the travelers strung out along it. A round object arced over the ship's side. When it hit the ground, it exploded into a cloud of green vapor. Those touched by the

fumes fell, retched and thrashed for a moment, and then lay still.

A deafening sound knocked down other warriors. Bleeding from their ears and noses, some of them did try to get up again, but only a single stag warrior succeeded.

Javelins and arrows flew up from the ground, but as impotently as Vandar had expected.

He remembered his fantasies of just a few moments before and despised himself for them. Because he was never going to lead his brothers to glory. By the time the pale sun reached its zenith in the gray winter sky, the Griffon Lodge would be extinct.

He reached down inside himself to find his own rage. For after all, what else was there to do?

E P I L O G U E

Aoth didn't know how long he'd wandered through the dark, silent labyrinth of tombs, graveyards, and funerary sculpture. Long enough for thirst to dry his throat. Long enough, maybe, for the struggle beneath the Fortress of the Half-Demon to grind to an end in one way or another.

Long enough for Cera and Jhesrhi to come to grief?

At the thought of them trapped in the cold, dead maze like he was, maybe fighting for their lives against creatures like the ones Dai Shan had hinted at, his jaw clenched. Suddenly, he couldn't believe he'd resigned himself to losing Cera if her calling led her to a high priestess's throne. Surely they could still find a way to be together, even if it was only for part of the year. Nor could he credit that he'd proceeded so gingerly when looking into Jhesrhi's transformation. True, she hated talking about intimate matters, but he couldn't just watch and wait if something truly bad had happened to her, especially if it wasn't over.

Things got away from me, he thought. Because the last couple of years were hard. There'd been the mad schemes of necromancers and dragons to thwart, and the Brotherhood

to haul back from the edge of ruin. But it was a poor excuse, and he promised himself he'd do better when the three of them were free of this wretched place.

First of all, he needed to free himself. As Dai Shan had observed, he lacked the specialized sort of esoteric knowledge that might have told him how, so all he could do was to explore and examine his surroundings with his fire-kissed eyes. They hadn't observed anything helpful yet, but he had to believe that eventually, they would.

Whenever he happened upon an arch crowned with three notches, he looked long and hard before moving on. And in time, he came to one that opened on an ossuary, an octagonal chamber with a vaulted ceiling. Intricate floral patterns, each made of a particular human bone, decorated the walls.

He studied the entry for a time, then sighed and started to turn away. But before he could, the view beyond the threshold flickered. It became a more modest vault, with six stone sarcophagi on pedestals. And the space was only dark for want of light, not choked with the cold, vile murk through which he'd been moving. But it stayed for only an instant before reverting to the crypt of bones.

Aoth's hand tightened on his spear. He'd heard of such a thing. It generally took the right trigger, the right magic, to open a doorway where two worlds touched. But occasionally it happened spontaneously, or in response to some cosmic phenomenon like a particular phase of the moon. Such an event had trapped Gaedynn and Jhesrhi in the Shadowfell, and, unless he was mistaken, another one had just occurred in front of him.

He resolved that when the arch changed again, he was going through.

He realized there were two potential problems with that idea. The first was that, for all he knew, the gate might not reopen anytime soon. The other was that when it did, it only stayed open for a heartbeat. If he couldn't make it all the

way through before it snapped shut again, it would cut him to pieces.

But to the Abyss with defeatist thoughts like that, he thought. He poised himself in front of the arch like a runner waiting for the starting bugle. And then he waited.

He waited until his muscles ached from standing still, and, despite the urgency of his task, his attention tried to wander like a dog tugging at the leash. He stretched, used the magic of his tattoos to refresh his body and mind, and locked his focus where it needed to be.

Suddenly, the six sarcophagi reappeared.

Aoth lunged forward so explosively that he couldn't stop in time to keep himself from banging his knee on one of the sarcophagi, and a bolt of fiercer pain told him he'd somehow stressed his sore neck. But he was through. He looked back and saw that the arch now opened on a corridor that was simply dark, not filled with the festering gloom of the maze.

As he prowled down the passage, spear and targe at the ready, he listened for sounds of those he'd left behind in the mortal world, for talk, shouts, screams, the clash of blades on shields, the boom and crackle of battle magic, or the chiming of the stag men's bells. But there was none of that, and after he had passed several other vaults and rounded a corner, he spotted sunlight up ahead.

It was spilling through the bars of a wrought-iron gate. Aoth charged his spear with power and used it as a pry bar to break open the lock. He warily stepped out of the mausoleum into a graveyard for humbler folk.

The snow here was gray with ash, and, although imposing, the castle surrounding the graveyard had the same sooty appearance.

As was only natural. Aoth couldn't see much of the surrounding mountains. The walls of the citadel blocked them out. But the red glow of the volcanoes reflected off the leaden clouds.

Appalled, he now understood why he hadn't heard any trace of his comrades or their enemies. It was because he was nowhere near the Fortress of the Half-Demon. He wasn't even in Rashemen anymore.

He was back in Thay.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Lee Byers is the author of over thirty fantasy and horror novels, including ten set in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® world. His short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. A resident of the Tampa Bay area, he is a frequent guest at Florida science fiction conventions and spends much of his free time fencing and playing poker. Visit his website at richardleebyers.com.

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